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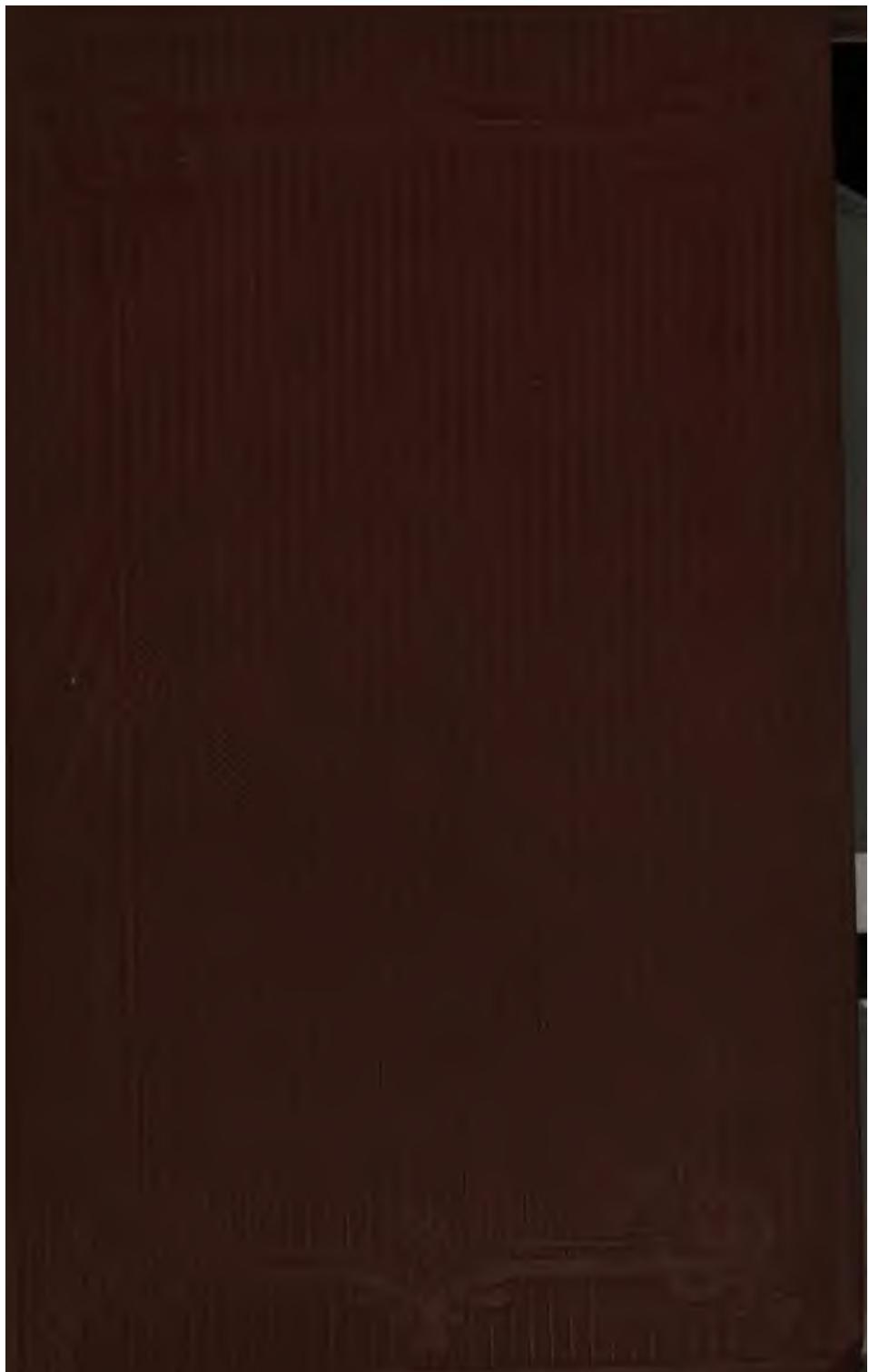
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JANITA'S CROSS.

VOL. II.

JANITA'S CROSS.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“S T. O L A V E’ S.”

“Work and wait.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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JANITA'S CROSS.

CHAPTER I.

THE common people of Meadowthorpe, the people who worshipped in free seats and lower-class painted pews, were not in the habit of attending Divine service more than once a day. A few who considered themselves as shining lights in the community, or who, as their ill-natured neighbours said, had an eye to blankets and Christmas beef from the Rectory, made a practice of nodding through afternoon prayers and dropping to sleep when the sermon began; but the easy-going folks, the little shopkeepers, the tailor, constable, and bellman, the greater part of the Duke's men, and the better sort of farm labourers, held fast to the old-fashioned

notion that afternoon church was an ordinance of human institution, and that all needful religious duties were properly disposed of when the morning congregation had "loosened." And therefore, after they had had a little friendly chat with the neighbouring Dykeland farmers in the church-yard, they went home, hung up their Sunday coats behind the kitchen door, ate the savoury dinner which had been prepared for them, and then, leaving their wives to wash up, lighted their pipes and sauntered forth either into the fields or to the "brig-foot," just at the turning of the St. Olave's road.

Except when there was a "ranter preaching" in the Mill-slip. Then they would cluster in little groups on the outskirts of the regular hearers, chewing long stalks of hay which they had pulled out of Farmer Benson's stack close by, and making sundry remarks, not always complimentary, on the doctrine or delivery of the minister. For plebeian Meadowthorpe had a vague notion, common to the well-regulated agricultural mind, that dissent is open to criticism. The most advanced of them would never have dreamed of such a thing as casting a reflection upon rectorial theology,

which, like the hymn-book and the "Catechise," was received as invulnerable. But with the methodist preacher the case was widely different. What right had he, standing on that unconsecrated deal chair fetched out of Mrs. Cloudie's front kitchen, to expect them to believe his words just the same as if they had been spoken from a carved oak pulpit with a sounding-board and crimson-velvet cushion, and everything that was proper? Or, wearing a cravat not properly tied, and sometimes, when he got excited, bringing to light a common red cotton handkerchief in place of the ministerial cambric which his wife had put into his right-hand pocket before he set off from St. Olave's, was he to expect to govern their modes of thinking and turn them round his little finger like a regularly-dressed clergyman? No, the parish intelligence knew better than that. As Destiny Smith, who considered himself to represent the parish intelligence, used to say, "It stands to reason as a man who goes about wi' an apron i' the week days, planin' wood and parin' leather, can't be so well larned i' the ways o' religion as our parson what never needs to mucky his fingers wi' nothin', and wears the best of

broadcloth every day of the week, and has a clean surplice reg'lar once a month.” And old Midgley, Alick's father, said that for his part he didn't much matter the ranter preacher either; he was overplain spoken, and never said nothing you couldn't understand right away. What was the use, old Midgley continued, of cleaning yourself and putting on your Sunday coat and sitting straight up on end for an hour, listening to a man as never said a fine word or anything as you didn't know what it meant. He liked Mr. Mabury best. Mr. Mabury had a heap o' book-larned words in his sermons as nobody could say 'em proper but hisself, and when the preacher talked that way it kind o' made you feel that he'd a right to teach you. For that was old Mr. Midgley's notion of being instructed. “Summut as flits above me,” he used to say. “That's what *I* like.”

So that dissent, on the whole, was not appreciated by the leading intelligence of Meadowthorpe parish.

But even when there did happen to be preaching in the Mill-slip, that bridge-foot was the favourite Sunday afternoon resort. It was to the working men what the tea-table was to the working women,

a place where the gossip of the village got brought into a focus and properly examined. There all the vexed questions of rustic politics were settled. If a parish beadle, or a bellman, or a constable, or a sexton was going to be appointed, or if one of the little tradesmen had failed, or if farmer somebody's horse had lamed itself, or if one of the Duke's men had been dismissed for making too free at the Checkers, the affair was taken to the "brig-foot," to be talked into shape. Besides, it was a convenient situation for gossip or controversy. The low stone parapet, lichenized now with the damp and storm of three centuries, was as handy as possible for sitting, or leaning, or lying upon. The place, too, was out of earshot of any of the great houses, specially the Rectory or steward's residence ; and therefore freedom of speech could be indulged to an unlimited extent, and if an out-spoken parishioner did happen to advance something derogatory to the powers that be, his offence was not visited upon him by a reprimand from the clergyman, or a withholding of ecclesiastical bounty.

Besides all this, the bridge-foot was a place where it was next to impossible to get into a

serious stage of anything but drowsiness. Very possibly had Meadowthorpe dyke been a brisk, fussy, nineteenth-century little river, careering along with plenty of brawling and self-importance, many a quarrel would have been brewed, and many a fight begun, at the foot of the low-mossed parapet which spanned its course; but who could fret or fume over that narrow strip of water which went sliding on, slow, dark, silent as a river of treacle? Quite too lazy to be indignant about anything; with only energy enough to mumble an inarticulate complaint when some superannuated old pollard willow, bent double with age, slipped in and impeded its flow. No; tough obstinacy might characterise the arguments carried on there, but passion or desperation, never.

The "brig-foot" assemblies were not, as might have been supposed, indiscriminate. Far from it. No west-end club was ever more tenacious of its rights, more particular as to the respectability of the members who lounged upon its velvet couches and yawned over its daily papers, than was the committee of the bridge-foot with regard to the eligibility of the people who were admitted to lean over that time-worn parapet. Only men of full

age were allowed standing room there. Boys were utterly scouted. Lads were looked at shyly and bidden to pass on. And, as in ancient Rome, a youth assumed with his *toga virilis* the dignities and immunities of citizenship, so it was not until a Meadowthorpe young man was out of his apprenticeship and receiving regular wages that he was qualified to vote in this, the rustic house of commons.

There was an unusually large assemblage at the "brig-foot" on the afternoon of the third Sunday in March, for the strangers who had just made their first public appearance at church had to be talked over. It was a pleasant afternoon for the time of year. There was a warm genial glow upon the thatched roofs of the cottages with their little olive-coloured patches of moss and houseleek, and upon the brown wheat fields, over which a faint tinge of pale green from thousands of tiny blades was beginning to creep. And every now and then, as the light clouds parted, there was a regular stream of rich spring sunshine which flashed upon the red and blue signboard of the Checkers, and kindled multitudes of little sparkles in the green glass buttons of old Mr. Midgley's Sunday waist-

coat, and made Farmer Benson's drakes look quite resplendent as they paddled down the shallow dyke amongst the slime and river-weed.

Larry Stead was there. He did not generally go to the brig-foot on a Sunday afternoon, but to-day there happened to be no preaching either in the Mill-slip or his own cottage, and the quarterly band meeting had been put off in consequence of alterations which were going on in Mrs. Cloudie's front kitchen, where it was usually held. There was therefore no immediate call upon Larry to the public dissenting means of grace. And he had already been in the path of duty, visiting two or three sick people in the village, who preferred his homely ministrations to those of the more elegant rector, and he had had a season of reading and serious conversation with his wife after dinner; so that, all things considered, we must not write bitter things against the primitive methodist carpenter, because on this, the third Sunday afternoon in March, he was leaning his shirt sleeves upon the low stone parapet, and smoking his pipe and meditating between the pauses of conversation, on the shining necks of Farmer Benson's drakes.

Young Alick was there, too, son and partner

of old Midgley, the blacksmith. Not much like a blacksmith though; for Alick was tall and straight and slim, with a clear rosy complexion, and plenty of black hair, which he took great pains to brush. Alick was a general favourite amongst the village maidens. He was so merry and good-looking, a capital dancer too, and steady, as young men go now-a-days; besides being his father's only son, and therefore successor to as profitable and well-established a business as any you might find in all the country round. Near to Alick, supporting his eight-and-twenty stone of animal material against one of the low grey buttresses, stood Barnie Wilson, the Duke's smith, a huge overgrown specimen of his craft, easy for the most part and good-natured, as is generally the case with overgrown men. Barnie was what the village people called "a bit shaky in the upper story." Two or three years before, he had joined the Latter-Day Saints and taken a vow never to cut his hair or beard. In process of time, when his locks became inconveniently luxuriant, he adopted the expedient of plaiting them in two tails behind, which he fastened up with red tape. This ingenious little device procured for him the so-

briquet of "Miss Wilson" from the more mischievously-inclined of his fellow-parishioners. And the boys coming home from school would shout the obnoxious epithet as they passed the Duke's forge, where Barnie's yellow-grey plaits were bobbing up and down on his broad back. Whereupon the fat blacksmith rolled himself into the doorway, brandishing his great hammer with a wrathful expression of countenance, but too wise to attempt pursuit, knowing well how small a chance the five feet of ventricular circumference which his leather apron girded, would have of overtaking the agile leaps of his juvenile tormentors. Destiny Smith was at the bridge-foot too; he always made a point of joining the society there until such time as he had to go and assist Mr. Mabury with afternoon service; and Peter Monk, foreman in the engine-room, and many other lesser lights, whose names it is needless to specify, since their conversation did not add to the interest of the proceedings.

"He's a fierce 'un, I'll warrant, and there's an end on it," said Destiny, by way of conclusion, for the church bell had begun to put in, and they had been discussing the new steward for nearly an

hour. "I never heard a man go with such a tramp down the aisle i' *my* life. Mercy on us! why, it was enough to make the very dead corpuses underneath lift up an' ask what was matter. He'll make a settlement o' things in this here place, he will. You see, Larry, there'll be no more half days' works now, and breakings off a quarter of an hour afore t' bell rings."

"Mr. Smith," and Larry Stead took his pipe out of his mouth, "it's laid upon my mind ever sin' I came to the Duke's yard, as it were a shame such like things was ever let to go on, and him such a master, and givin' good wage reglar from year end to year end. Accordin' to my line o' thinkin', you might as well put your hand into a master's pocket and fetch up half-a-crown out on it, as be allers spying round to see how you can knock off ten minutes here and ten minutes there, and a bit more somewhere else, and then take your wage as brazen-faced as if you'd done nought but what was honest."

"Well," said Destiny, "I don't see as a man need harass hisself wi' little things like them there; mint an' anise an' cummin, as the Scripters says. I've allers broke off work a good five minutes

afore t' bell rung this ten year past, an' it never laid uncomfortable upon *my* conscience, it didn't; an' I could say the psalms and do the responses just as if I were the best man i' the parish. Bless us! I'd as soon wear a pair o' boots lined wi' thistlepricks as have a conscience like yours, Larry, as is allers catchin' you up if you don't behave yourself like one of them painted saints i' the church windy."

"My conscience never did me a bad turn yet, Mr. Smith, since God Almighty fettled it up for me and set it agoing proper. But what I say is this: a man had ought to bring his religion, if he's got any, into the reglar doins of his life, and not be allers scrapin' and contrivin' how he can make a bit o' planin' or hammerin' last longest. I should shame to take my wage if I'd addled it that way."

"Well, Larry, I lets folks do as they've a mind to, but I will say this, that there isn't a man i' the Duke's yard does a better day's work, or a longer, than yourself. I reckon it's the ranters teached you; they're allers for shifting religion into t' week days, as if it warn't enough to do your praying of a Sunday, and then put it by. Laws! if you had

to say three big pages o' psalms after t' clergyman twice a day, let alone givin' out hymns to the praise an' glory, and tewin' wi' them responses, as the clerk has to do 'em all i' this parish, cause the quality folk won't fash themselves so much as to whisper 'em, and the Sunday-school children would make such a hash of 'em as never was, if I didn't shout up well and give a lead, I say, Larry, if you'd all that to do of a Sunday, you'd none be so keen of shiftin' over your religion into t' week days, and makin' it do double work in a manner."

"Whatever I had to do of a Sunday, Mr. Smith, prayers or no prayers, I should think that was a poor sort o' religion as didn't run over into the week, and put a shine and a beauty into everything as you'd gotten to do. I know many's the time I should clean break down if I hadn't a blessed sense o' God's presence when I'm agate i' the Duke's yard. Sometimes I'se ready to set on and murmur because I can't get more time for readin' and meditatin'; it goes sort o' hard agen a man when he's been workin' over hours while maybe ten at night to addle a bit extra for winter, and has to be up agen in the mornin' afore daylight, I say it goes hard agen him to nibble a bit off his

nat'ral rest for readin' and prayin'; but I oft-times prays while I works, and God Almighty accepts it all the same as if I was down of my knees. He don't look at postures, He don't, when a man's heart's in the right place."

"Well, that's over-much for me, it is. I couldn't harass wi' a religion as allers kept me going like that. I'm comfortable as I is, and that's t' reason, Larry, I don't go to hear your ranter preachers; they *make* folks believe 'em whether they've a mind to or not, and I don't want to be set askew, and I don't want to be meddled wi' about that five minutes afore t' bell rings. Things goes easy wi' me now, and I don't see no call to harass about them there spiritle matters."

And having adjusted his religious interests in this way, Destiny Smith shook the ashes out of his pipe into the dyke, put the pipe into his waistcoat pocket, his hands into his trousers pockets, and then set off down the village to afternoon church, whistling the Old Hundredth as he went. Larry gazed after him sadly for some moments.

"That man's case lies heavy upo' my mind," he said at last. "There's a work o' grace in his heart, I do believe, but he's a tryin' to choke it.

He knows as he's wrong. There's a vast o' folks as knows that; but——"

"I say, Larry Stead, just you shut up there. I reckon we don't come along here to the brig-foot to hear a set o' methodisses talking like a band-meeting. It's every bit as ridikilis as them *exercises*, as you call 'em, as is let to go on in Mrs. Cloudie's kitchen. And it's a good riddance it 'ud be to the parish, if them sort o' ways was clean swept out. But you may go back to what you was a saying of before you set on with all that nonsense; and I'll tell you this, there isn't a religion going as'll make me do a hand's turn for the Duke more'n I've a mind to. And with all your jawin' about religion, what's religion done for you, I should like to know? For you're as poor as a church mouse, all the parish o' Meadowthorpe can see that with half an eye, and after you've mixed it up with so much prayin' as you talk about, you can't addle enough to keep your wife and childer clothed decent. I wouldn't give an old nail for a religion as does no more good for a man than that."

And Peter Monk laughed that low, hissing laugh of his.

"My religion helps me to keep my hands from

picking and stealing, my tongue from lying and evil-speaking, and my conscience void of offence towards God and man."

Larry drew himself up as he said this, looking steadily into Peter Monk's face. Monk shifted about uneasily before that unconscious, straightforward gaze. No one in the parish had a very good opinion of the Duke's engine-man, though, as yet, he had been convicted of nothing bad, and his past life, whatever it might have been, was known only to himself. Still, it was with rather a cowed, humiliated sort of look that he said—

"If your religion doesn't put a vast o' money into your pocket, Mr. Stead, it puts plenty of ill words into your mouth; and if you talk such a deal about your conscience, it's a pity but it 'ud make you a bit heedfuller about talking sideways at folks as hasn't done you no harm. If I'd a conscience I'd use it that way."

It was Larry's turn to be softened now. There was something in Monk's cringing, deprecating whine that made him feel just as if he had actually been accusing the man of guilt.

"Nay, nay, Mr. Monk; I was, maybe, a bit hasty, but I didn't mean to say nought con-

trary. If I've angered you, you mun forgive me."

And Larry Stead, turning about, bent down upon Monk's whimpering scowl, a face so beaming with hearty good-will that it would have softened the hardest of enemies. Monk could not meet it comfortably, and so he crossed over to the other side of the bridge, where Alick and Barnie Wilson were having a chat together.

"Well, Alick," he said to the good-looking young blacksmith, "I haven't seed you and that pretty-faced little hussey of a housemaid arm-in-arm of a late. You haven't been quarrellin' with red-cheeked Bessie, have you, young man?"

Alick, addressed thus, blushed quite up to the roots of his black hair. He had a sort of liking for Bessie. He never felt so proud as when he was walking down the lane on a Sunday evening with her hand resting on his arm, or chatting with her in the church-yard, in presence of the assembled village beaux. But he had not that manly, respectful love which would have made him hate to hear her name, joined to the coarse laugh and leer-ing look with which Peter Monk used it now.

"I—I ain't. Bessie Ashton isn't nothing to me. There's over many young men looking sweet upon

her for a young fellow like me to get a chance to put in a word for hisself."

"Oh! that's just as you like to take it," said Monk, giving young Alick an expressive wink. "Faint heart never won fair lady, as I reckon. She only wants flattering. The women is all alike, a pretty word and a pretty ribbon, and you've got them straight away. But I'll tell you what, Alick, if you want to cage your bonnie bird, you'd best look handy, for there's many a cage as the door's open for her to hop in; but she's shy, is the little poppet. There's your light toppined young mavis as chirps in the church choir, he'll be picking of her up by and by, if you don't give a try yourself. She's a rare one for makin' the men run after her, is bonnie Bessie, bless her!"

Roy, who was just coming over the bridge, on his way to his father's garden, overheard this last remark.

"What's that you're saying about Bessie Ashton, there? You'd better take care."

And as Roy said it, he looked down like an uncrowned prince on the pitiful little shred of humanity that was leering and laughing and winking its eyes at young Alick the smith.

“Oh! and so I suppose nobody’s to talk about the girl because she’s pretty. Other folks has got eyes for a bonnie lass besides yourself, Mr. Roy. I ain’t to call a beauty myself, but I always get good luck with my courting when I step up and put my best foot foremost, and the curly-haired little wench has sense enough to know when a man’s got a good lining o’ gold to his pocket, even if he hasn’t a headpiece quite as viewly as your own. And there isn’t a man in the parish as mayn’t win and wear her too, if he’s a mind to. They’re easy caught, is the women, nobbut you’ve a golden line to bait ‘em. And the bonnier they are, the easier you may pick ‘em up, ‘cause it’s allers good looks and foolishness as goes together.”

Roy measured the little scoundrel from top to toe, no long distance either. Who is it says these light-haired, pale-faced men are tame and spiritless? No swarth Italian could have matched the scorn which flashed out of Roy’s keen blue eyes, as he said indignantly:

“Peter Monk, if you talk about Bessie Ashton in that way, I’ll drop you down in the dyke there, I will,” and Roy pointed over the low stone wall to the dark, gurgling waters beneath. “You

know well enough she hasn't a brother to stand up for her, and no one to fence away your ill words, and if you were half a man, instead of the poor pitiful bit of a chip that you are, you would think shame to say a word as would bring up a blush to her cheek if she could hear you. You'd better have a care, though."

"Oh, my!" said Peter Monk, laughing, for he was safe enough between Barnie Wilson's twenty-eight stones of flesh and the grey buttress. "We're wonderful brave this afternoon, we are, and pretty-faced Bessie is in good luck to have such a fine young man to stick up for her; and I'll tell her so, that I will, next time I get a walk down Meadowthorpe lane with her, bless her pretty eyes, and them bonnie blue bows in her cap! It's me as gived her the blue bows, Mr. Roy, and she's many a thing I've gived her, for I haven't to scratch over hours to addle the bite and sup, as some folks has."

Young Roy lacked the white hands and courtly accents of the high-bred aristocrat, but he did not lack the proud chivalry which holds a woman's name sacred, and never speaks it but with manly respect. Peter Monk's words stung him to the

quick ; his usually calm, pale face, glowed with hot passion, his eyes sparkled, his voice quivered as he said, so loudly and impetuously that all the people at the bridge-foot could hear him :

“It’s nothing but drowning that you deserve, Peter Monk, and it’s a good turn anyone would do to the world that helped you out of it. And though I am poor, I never said a word yet that I should be ashamed for any woman in the parish to hear, and that’s better, as I take it, than having your pockets lined with sovereigns, as no one knows how you got them, or what sin they’re the wages of.”

And, as ill luck would have it, a couple of half-drunk men came rolling out of the Checkers as Roy made this somewhat unguarded speech. The men had just sense enough left to stagger home and tell their wives that young Roy and Peter Monk had been having a desperate quarrel at the bridge-foot, and that Roy had taken a vow to drown Peter Monk in the dyke. And of course when the wives heard it, the matter was soon all over the town, and one and another said that Roy was a brave fellow, but over-passionate, and that that hot temper of his would bring him to grief

some day, that it would. For there was no telling what passion and jealousy, put together, would do when they got hold of a man. That was what the women said about it. And young Alick, the smith, and Barnie Wilson, and old Midgley, and nearly a dozen others, who had heard the speech, said the same. So that it would have been better for Roy, very much better, if he could have kept himself back from saying what he did.

CHAPTER II.



JOY walked away from the bridge-foot as soon as he had got those hasty words off his tongue. Walked away down to his father's garden, there to quiet himself as best he could by leaning over the low gate which opened into the haling-bank road, and watching the slow sleepy dyke waters go oozing past, scarce moving the river-weed that swayed beneath them, or breaking into a single quiver the shadows of the grey pollard willows, whose branches almost met over their silent tide.

Whilst he was standing there, thinking very bitter thoughts, feeling already that weary, remorseful sadness, which follows so closely in the track of passion, Bessie Ashton was dressing herself with unusual care in the little whitewashed

bed-room, up at the top of the Professor's dingy old house.

For that was Bessie's Sunday afternoon out; the red-letter day, which came once a quarter to break the drearisome monotony of scrubbing and dusting and cleaning; the day to which her little purchases, in the shape of collars and neck-ribbons and bonnet-caps, generally had reference. Bessie's Sunday afternoons out were the same to her as balls and assemblies are to the belles of society, the arena of her social triumphs and petty flirtations. And no Belgravian maiden, in all the glory of her first season, ever looked forward more impatiently to her successive public appearances, or prepared for them with more anxious solicitude than did Bessie for those quarterly snatches of liberty, those elysian hours, when, free from the incessant screamings of Miss Hepzibah, and the touchy, ill-natured remarks of Abigail, she could saunter at will down Meadowthorpe lane, or the St. Olave's road, arm-in-arm with her favoured swain, whoever he might be; listening to his pretty compliments, lifting her grey eyes now and then to meet a glance of eager admiration, feeling that she had nothing to do but enjoy herself and

shine out as queen of beauty amongst the lesser lights of rustic maidenhood.

Only, if the afternoon should turn out wet! Oh! you spangled and silken robed ladies of fashion, who go into society whenever you choose, whom neither rain nor storm can deprive of the gay quadrille party where you hope to make a new conquest, or deepen one already begun, do you ever, as you arrange your jewelled wreath and draw on your white gloves, think of Joan, or Betty, or Mary Ann, whose tinsel brooch and sixpenny neckerchief, wherewith she hoped to do so much, lie useless in her drawer, because the afternoon has "turned out wet?" Do you ever think of the slow, dull, aching pain that creeps into the heart of your poor little parlour-maid, who cannot go out to meet her lover to-day, because of that pelting, pitiless rain which would ruin the hardly-earned best gown, and spoil the best bonnet, but which can never penetrate your varnished carriage roof, or the draped awning beneath which, all elegance and winning smiles, you pass into the gilded saloons where you will meet that fascinating captain of the Blues, or that bearded young lieutenant who pressed your hand

so tenderly at the ball only last night ? Ah, me ! I am afraid not.

But there was no danger of rain this afternoon, no need for Bessie to take that ugly thick cotton umbrella, lest a chance shower should damage the straw bonnet which she had just had dyed black, and trimmed with cherry-coloured ribbon. She had spread out all her things ready on the bed before dinner, so that no time might be wasted ; for she was going to St. Olave's to drink tea with her married sister, Mrs. Hastings, who kept a little grocer's shop not far from the gaol, and it took a full hour and a half to walk to St. Olave's, even if you hurried yourself, and Bessie did not care to do that, because it made her look frowsy. So there lay the said bonnet, with a handkerchief over it to keep away the dust, and the best frock of dark green Cobourg, which Miss Jane had given her for a Christmas gift—the money had been sent from Inverallan—and the shepherd's plaid shawl which she had bought with part of her last quarter's wages. And tucked away under the shawl, so that if Miss Hepzibah chanced to pass the room she should not see it, was a little steel brooch, a very little one, in the shape of a star, which Roy had

bought her at St. Olave's Martinmas fair, and a white pocket-handkerchief, set round with penny edging, the same pattern, though of course not so good as what Mrs. Maguire wore at church on a Sunday. I feel as if I ought to mention this, though I am afraid it will lower your opinion of Bessie's good sense, and you will say that she deserved to be turned out of her place there and then, for aping her betters in such a foolish way. Well, she certainly was very foolish. You know we decided that more than three months ago.

But, although these little preliminaries had been arranged, Bessie gave herself half an hour to dress. For she had her hair to oil and brush and braid up in that five-strand plait which Mrs. Mabury's maid had taught her; and sometimes it was awkward to get the braids to sit nicely, just so as to show under the curtain of her bonnet. Then there were the bonnet strings to tie, she meant to tie them like Miss Narrowby's, and Miss Narrowby sometimes spent as much as ten minutes in tying hers, the parlour-maid at Gablehouse had said so. But there was a story connected with those bonnet strings.

Only ten days ago, Bessie had seen Roy walking

down the village with a young woman, a very nice looking young woman, whom she had never seen before; neither Mary Andrews, nor the lady's maid at Mrs. Macturk's, nor Polly Rush the whitesmith's daughter; indeed Bessie thought Roy's companion was better looking and better dressed than any of these. And as she watched them down the street, there came a cold, miserable feeling over her, such a feeling as in all her life she had never had before; and she began to know then how it would be to see Roy always walking with someone, and that someone not herself. And when she had watched them out of sight, she took out her handkerchief to wipe away a tear. Bessie's fears were groundless. The stranger in question was a cousin of Roy's, a young woman from the country, who was engaged to be married to a carpenter in St. Olave's; indeed they had been asked in church only the Sunday before, for the first time. But Bessie did not know anything about that little matter, so that her sufferings were equally as keen as if Roy had fallen in love with someone else. And she sought to reclaim his wandering affections by a pair of new bonnet strings, for which she had paid eighteen-pence, more than

she had ever paid for bonnet strings before ; but the draper told her they were the latest fashion, and that they would suit her complexion admirably, and that Mrs. Maguire had bought a pair just like them only the week before. They were cherry colour, with black leaves upon them, and she knew Roy liked cherry colour.

Those were the bonnet strings Bessie had to tie this afternoon, and that was the reason she spent so much time in tying them.

Though she made all the haste she could, it was nearly three o'clock before she came out of the little wooden gate which led into Gentility Square, the gate from which Janita had taken her first prospect of the great world of Meadowthorpe. Bessie looked up and down the road to see if there was anyone there, ready to join her ; but not a creature was visible, except a few little girls with stiffly-starched print frocks and very spotless white stockings, on their way to the Sunday school. Bessie was vexed, rather. Generally on a Sunday afternoon someone was loitering about, waiting for her ; Alick in his best coat and spruce blue tie, or the tall footman, or Peter Monk, any of whom were glad enough of an hour's chat with

her. And she was still more disappointed when, going past old Ben Royland's cottage, she missed that kingly head with its coronet of fair hair which scarcely ever failed to be visible behind the white muslin curtain. It really seemed as if her long walk to St. Olave's this afternoon was to be a lonely one.

Now, you may call Bessie Ashton a giddy girl if you like, because she sometimes walked arm in arm with Peter Monk, and very often blushed when young Alick complimented her, and was not ashamed of being seen after service talking to the tall footman from the Bishop's palace. And very likely if she had been your housemaid, you would have refused to give her a character to another place because she was foolishly vain and fastened her shepherd's-plaid shawl with a little steel brooch, instead of the huge halfpenny pin which is used by your plain cook of steady principles, Abigail Snarey for instance, whose ugly brass-headed skewer seemed to be always flaunting its "steady principles" in the face of the public. But I say that Bessie was neither giddy nor vain, and she proved it this afternoon. For instead of going to St. Olave's over the bridge,

where she would have been sure to meet half-a-dozen beaux, she took the long path through the meadows and past the haling-bank road, because, as she said, she did not care to put herself in the way of the men.

Miss Hepzibah Ruthven's housemaid looked very pretty that afternoon. You can picture her to yourself if you like as she goes thoughtfully along the little foot-path past the brown hedge-rows, the March sunshine sparkling upon the black hair, whose glossy ripple contrasted so well with the clear whiteness of her forehead—Bessie was glad her forehead and nose did not freckle like the second Miss Narrowby's—and the March wind stirring up a rich, rosy glow upon her young cheeks, and the five-strand plait peeping out just as it ought to do beneath her bonnet curtain. And when her shawl gets blown a little on one side, you can see the lace-edged handkerchief that she has arranged so as to show nicely out of her pocket, and also you may see a small paper parcel, which contains Bessie's Sunday collar and the pink neck ribbon which she is going to wear at her sister's for the first time this afternoon. A simple toilet, a very simple toilet, but oh! if I

could only make you understand all the care and pains which have been bestowed upon it. Because Mrs. Hastings knows that her sister is going there to tea this afternoon, and she knows that Bessie always colours up when Roy is mentioned, and she knows too, that it is a long, lonely walk home from St. Olave's in the dark evening, and so if she is at all a sensible woman she will have asked young Royland to step over and have his tea with them in that comfortable little parlour behind the grocer's shop. And Bessie knows that her sister is a sensible woman, and so she is comforting her foolish heart with the thought that perhaps—— I hope she will not be disappointed, and I am sure if you have any humanity about you, you will hope so too; though the girl is, as you say, vain, and flirtish, and giddy, and much given to aping her betters in the matter of steel brooches and penny edgings.

A quarter of an hour's walk brought Bessie Ashton to that narrow part of the haling-bank road which led past old Royland's garden; that dangerous part where the bank shelved down so abruptly to the dyke, and where the little bit of path was so slippery with river-weed and rotten

last-year's leaves. Roy was leaning over the gate, his face half-hidden upon his folded arms. When Bessie first caught sight of him she felt rather "tossy," as if she should like to pay him off for not having waited for her at the lane end ; but when she came nearer and saw how depressed and spiritless he appeared, her better nature conquered. She walked straight up to him, and, without any coquettish airs or graces, shook hands and said—

"Good afternoon, Mr. Royland. I hope your mother isn't no worse?"

"No, thank you, Bessie. The doctor says she's took a turn this week for the better, and maybe she'll look up again when the spring gets fixed in."

Then what does he look like that for ? thought Bessie. But she got a light on the subject from Roy's next sentence.

"I was waiting for you best part of half an hour at father's door, Bessie, but I couldn't get sight of you, and I thought you'd most likely lighted on somebody as would set you to your sister's. There's many as would be glad enough to do it."

Bessie drew herself up with a pretty little touch of dignity.

“Mr. Royland,”—she had taken to calling him Mr. Royland lately, Roy thought it was a sign of diminishing friendliness, perhaps other people will not think so—“Mr. Royland, I don’t keep company with any one I chance to light on, as you call it, and you ought to know better than cast a thing o’ that sort in my face. It was just Miss Hepzibah’s contrariness; she always sits ever so much longer over the pie and cheese when it’s my Sunday out, ’cause she knows I want to be quick and get me dressed.”

“Ay, she’s a rough stick to take hold on, is Miss Hepzibah, but I lay it won’t be long afore you’re done with her, if folks say right.”

And as Roy looked down into Bessie’s clear, blooming face, the remembrance of Peter Monk’s poisonous words stung him afresh.

“I don’t know what you mean, Mr. Royland, by talking that sort o’ way, and I think it’s a pity but what folks had summut better to do wi’ their tongues than set tales agoing about me, as never gived them no ’casjon to say nothing. But if that’s all, maybe I may as well say good afternoon to you. I reckon I shall be full late at my sister’s.”

And suiting the action to the word, Bessie turned

away, her lip quivering, and something like a tear in her eye. Though she would not own it to herself, it had been such a pleasant thought, that perhaps Roy was going to St. Olave's too ; and she would scarcely have taken that long path through the meadows but for the hope that she should meet him at his father's gate, and that he would offer to go along with her to her sister's.

But Roy could not let her leave him so. He felt that in some way she belonged to him ; that she was his own, because of the deep love he bore her ; that no one else would ever care for her as he had done, or be so true to her. And yet, had he the right to say this to her ? Could he justly bind her to wait months, perhaps years, for him, when she might be Peter Monk's wife before three weeks had passed ? And would she be willing to share a poor man's home, even if that home were ready ; content only with the strong right hand to work for and protect her, and the faithful heart to bless her always with its love ? Only these. And Peter Monk, though he could not give her these, could give her so much else that women sometimes prize more dearly.

But the time was passing whilst these thoughts

came crowding over him, and Bessie was already turning away from the little gate that led down to the haling-bank road. Roy reached out his hand and clasped hers firmly, very firmly, as an honest man has the right to do.

“Bessie, I didn’t mean to grieve you, but I’ve been hard put to it this long time past to see you going about with Alick Midgley, and the Bishop’s footman, and that scamp of a Monk, as will never do you no good, with all his fine speeches and pretty presents. And then——”

“Mr. Royland, hold your tongue, *do*. I don’t go with Alick; I don’t care a bit for him, and if he was to ax me, I’d tell him so. And the footman isn’t nothing to me, he thinks overmuch of himself. And as for Mr. Monk, it’s a shame of you to keep throwing him at me that way, for I don’t keep company with him, only when he plagues me so as I can’t say him no.”

“But it’s pretty often he *does* plague you, then, Bessie; and I think, if you’d a mind to, you could teach him as you didn’t mean to be plagued no more. I seed you with him, last Sunday was a week, coming out of church, and you was down the lane with him only a bit since, and wasn’t he

saying something to you that there day as the new steward comed?"

"That there day," was the day Peter Monk had given her the blue ribbons for her bonnet-cap, together with a great many compliments, which, at the time, Bessie thought were quite as beautiful as the bows. And Bessie, like most other pretty girls, whether peeresses or parlour-maids, liked to be talked to in that way; and though she always gave herself an indignant little jerk, and said: "Don't talk nonsense," when Peter Monk began his pretty speeches, yet in her heart she would have been disappointed if he had taken her at her word, and ceased the nonsense, and begun, instead, to talk about the weather or the crops, as the fat, red-faced butler generally used to do when he met her. So a coquettish smile curled Bessie's rosy lips, as she replied:

"I don't see as you've any right to ax me, Mr. Royland, about them sort o' things, but if he did tell me I was the prettiest girl in the parish, it's only what I've been telled so oft, while I'm tired o' listening to it. And you may say what you like, but Mr. Monk has beautiful manners, he has, and there isn't no disgrace, to my mind, in being

behaved to genteel by him. I don't interfere with you going with who you like, and you mustn't interfere with me."

The village belle was getting "tossy" again now, and she had thoughts of reminding Roy of that little matter she had mentioned once before, about going backwards and forwards in his shirt-sleeves; but when she looked up, and saw his sad, anxious countenance, she relented. However, she did manage to twist her hand out of his grasp before she finished what she had to say.

"And I don't see but what I've as good a right to walk with him, if I've a mind to, as anyone in the parish. And there's no call for you to keep on scolding me that way. I get as much from Miss Hepzibah as I can put up with, let alone other folks setting on, and making me feel as if I was as wicked as never was, just because I give a civil word to them as gives it me first. And I'm sure
—"

But there Bessie's words failed her, and the tears got into her eyes, and she was obliged to turn away, and pretend to be very busy examining the little white buds that were beginning to peep out on the old pollard willow by the gate.

Roy saw those tears, and they made his voice tenderer. But he did not try to get her hand back again.

“Bessie, Bessie, take care ! He’s a man that’ll never do you no good, is Peter Monk. If I thought he really cared for you, darling, I wouldn’t say a word agen him, though nobody knows how it would go through me to see you married to anyone else, and I’ve loved you ever since you came into the parish, only I could never frame to tell you so, because things hasn’t been so bright with me of late as they are with a many as looks sweet upon you. But I’ve loved you, Bessie, all the same, though I couldn’t say it, and I’d do my best, yes, that I would, to make you happy if only you’d give me the chance ; and I’d work for you as long as I’d a bit of strength left to do a day’s work. And though I say it myself,” Roy threw his head back now with a little of the old pride, “there isn’t a man in the parish has a word to say agen me, though I’ve been born and brought up in it, and so has my father afore me, and everybody knows what I am and all about me, and I’m not afraid to walk down Meadowthorpe street, and look ’em straight in the face, and tell ’em everything I’ve done since I was put appren-

tice in the Duke's yard. And oh, Bessie! it grieves me, it does, to see that Peter Monk trifling with you, as no one knows who he is, or where he comes from, though, as I telled you afore, if I thought he loved you, I'd try and bear it like a man, I would."

In answer to which, Bessie could only droop her head, and crumple those new eighteen-penny bonnet-strings between her fingers, until all the shine and freshness had gone out of them. And she kept dashing the tear-drops out of her eyes, whilst in a sort of dream she heard Roy speak Monk's name. But what was Peter Monk to her now? And what did she care for his blue ribbons and his pretty speeches? And what were new gowns and bonnets ever so many times a year, and even a house with a parlour to it such as Mr. Monk talked of renting when he got married, if she might never think about Roy any more, or walk side by side with him down Meadowthorpe lane, or look up into his brave, proud face, that face that bent over her now, as he talked on rapidly, earnestly in those low broken tones? Tones so low and broken that Bessie could scarcely make out all they meant, only this she understood: Roy was telling her he

loved her, and wanted her to be his wife, and that he had never loved anyone but her, and never should, and that if she would only tell him that she cared for him just a very little bit, a little more than she cared for Peter Monk or Alick the smith, it would make him so happy. Would she not tell him so much as that, only a word, just one word ?

No. Bessie could not say even that one word. For the tears were blinding her eyes until she could no longer see the little white buds on the old pollard willow. And she began to feel, as she had never felt before, how good and patient Roy had been to bear with her all these months whilst she had angered him so and vexed him with her vain foolish ways. And still turning her face away that he might not see how she was crying, Bessie put her hand quietly into Roy's. Nothing more than that. But something in the touch told him that her heart had gone with it.

It was not a little hand, neither was it delicately gloved like those which London belles lay with such gentle perfumed touches on the coat sleeves of their moustached cavaliers at balls and evening parties. It was a coarse hand rather, and rough with

much scrubbing and scouring, that Bessie Ashton laid within Roy's there under the old pollard willow. And I do not know what Roy did upon the occasion, whether he kissed it or pressed it to his heart, or went through any of the performances usually described in story-books as suitable to such circumstances. But this I do know, that never moustached cavalier, lounging in the balcony of a Park Lane drawing-room, after the last quadrille was over, clasped more fervently the tiny hand, jewelled and braceleted and enveloped in best three and sixpenny French kid, which, together with its owner's affections, and a snug little property of fifty thousand or more had just been made over to him—I say never moustached cavalier clasped more fervently such a hand bearing such a consignment, than did Roy the red hand, gloved in common-place Lisle thread, somewhat worn perhaps at the finger ends, which Bessie laid in his as they stood together at the little gate by the haling-bank road on that third Sunday afternoon in March, while the tall flag-leaves quivered in the sunshine, and the lark caroled his joy song high up among the fleecy clouds.

So after all they did walk to St. Olave's to-

gether. By the dyke-side, where the forget-me-nots bloomed up in great clusters amongst the sedge, and the broad green lily leaves rocked so sleepily to and fro upon the idle current; along grassy lanes, from whose budding hedgerows the robins peeped at them with sly, mischievous glances, chirping all the while for joy at the pleasant sunshine; over level meadows where the wild rabbits, startled by the sound of their footsteps, darted hither and thither across the short, scant grass. Such a little way it seemed before those quaint old overhanging houses shut them in, and looking up, they saw the grand Minster front scarce a stone's throw from them. Such a little way, though some of the very early people were already on their road to evening service at the Norland's lane meeting-house, and Mrs. Hastings had been watching for them a full half hour, from the window over the shop, which looked quite down to the St. Olave's road.

Bessie did not say anything to her sister as she stood before the looking-glass, tidying her hair, and fitting her new collar, and fastening it with the steel brooch which Roy had given her. Mrs. Hastings, being a sensible woman, did not say any-

thing either, except that it was a lovely afternoon for the time of year, and that the crops seemed to be coming on nicely, and that the farmers were going to have a first-rate season to make up for the wet weather last back end. But after tea, when Roy and Mr. Hastings had got into conversation about the new steward, Bessie contrived to beckon the grocer's wife up-stairs into the best bed-room, and there, as they sat together on the little white-curtained bed, she told her all about it. First, how she and Roy had loved each other for a very long time, but they had never made it up until that afternoon, when she had met him leaning over the gate in old Ben's garden; and how she was going to try and be a real good wife to him when they got married, and make him as happy as could be. But they were not going to be married for a long time, because Roy was not very well off, and times had been bad lately. She did not care about that though, not a bit; she would rather wait a whole twelvemonth for Roy than marry anybody else right away; for if Alick had as good a look out as any young man in the lordship, and if Peter Monk could fill her purse with golden sovereigns, over and over, still neither

of them could match her own Roy ; he was so good and patient, besides carrying himself just like a prince, as everybody in the parish said he did ; and he had borne with all her foolishness so long, even when she had downright angered him, and behaved so badly. But she would never anger him any more now, and she didn't care if she never set eyes on Peter Monk again, or if Alick the smith never spoke to her any more, it wouldn't make a bit of difference to her, she was sure it wouldn't. And she felt settled now, in a manner, as if she shouldn't care to have the men coming about after her any more, as they used to come, plaguing her with their fine speeches, and telling her about her rosy cheeks, and her pretty eyes, and all that sort of thing. She was sure she never really cared for having them talk to her at all, only they *would* keep coming with their nonsense. But she didn't mean to encourage them any more now, she would send them right away about their business, if ever they dared to talk to her in that way again. For it would grieve Roy if he got to hear about it, and she must not grieve Roy now.

All this, and a great deal more than this, Bessie said, with her arm round her sister's waist, with a

few tears, and a great many smiles, as they sat up there in the best bed-room, the St. Olave's bells ringing all round and about them for evening service, Mr. Hastings and Roy talking together in the back parlour about the new steward, and how Meadowthorpe would be likely to prosper under his management. And when Bessie had finished, Mrs. Hastings, who was a common-sense, practical sort of woman, put in her word ; asking, first of all, a few matter-of-fact questions about the young man's position and prospects, whether he had anything laid by in the bank to furnish a cottage, and whether the Duke's timber-yard was a likely place for promotion, and whether he was a young man that went to church regularly, and behaved well to his mother—needful questions, very, before venturing upon housekeeping. And when they had been properly answered, Mrs. Hastings went on to give Bessie a little judicious advice about how she ought to behave under the circumstances, how she was not to let young Royland have her too much under his finger and thumb, for men were but men, and had a great notion of keeping women down unless the women stood up well for themselves, and kept a brisk tongue in their heads. But still Bessie

was to be careful and do her duty to him, and whilst asserting her independence properly, was to be very careful how she conducted herself to the rest of the men, and was never to give any cause for people to talk against her. And then Mrs. Hastings touched upon other little domestic matters, which any woman, who has had the management of a husband for ten or a dozen years, knows so well how to give to her unmarried sisters. Which little domestic matters Bessie heard in a vague, heedless manner, listening all the while to the far-off tones of Roy's voice, sounding from the back parlour down-stairs.

Mrs. Hastings' good advice took so much giving, that long before she had exhausted her store, Mr. Hastings came up to say that young Mr. Royland seemed to be on the fidget to set off home, for it was a long step by the high road, and Miss Hepzibah was so "terrible partic'lar" about the maids getting in by nine. And when the little grocer had said this he winked slyly at his sister-in-law, and said he reckoned she'd have a tolerable nice walk home. Bessie said nothing, but she wished Mr. Hastings would be still, and she was very glad Roy was not there to hear him.

So they set off in the clear Spring starlight, Bessie's hand held, all the way, fast in Roy's great strong fingers. It was a very quiet walk. Bessie scarcely knew whether to smile or cry ; she seemed all in a flutter and tremble. Only she felt that it was a joy beyond what she had ever known before, to have her hand so held fast in Roy's, and to be quite sure that all through life he would take care of her, that they would never have to part, never have to lose sight of each other any more now.

"Never." That is such a long word, as Janita said to Willie Home when he told her, just before she came away from Inverallan, that he would never forget her.

Roy was too happy to talk much. It was enough to feel that Bessie belonged to him, that he had a right to take care of her, and watch over her, that no Peter Monk, with slippery speeches and smooth, soft tongue, should win his darling away to misery and ruin. Perhaps, also, his thoughts passed, as the sweetest, noblest thoughts do often pass, into silent prayers for her who had long been dearer to him than his own life, whose happiness was all in his keeping now.

The church clock was striking nine as they came into the village, with its twinkling cottage-lights, and up to the tall, narrow, severe-looking portal of the Aspens. There, with one lingering handclasp, Roy left her; and with the touch of his lips yet warm upon her own, she ran away up-stairs into the little whitewashed attic, where, sitting on the deal trunk which contained her worldly goods, she covered her face and began to cry. Not for joy, nor for grief, but for a sweet, quiet-hearted content, which as yet she could not understand.

Pretty, foolish, affectionate Bessie Ashton! Will she really behave herself in a more perfect way now? Will she give over looking across to the Bishop's pew on a Sunday morning, or casting stray glances towards Mrs. Macturk's red-faced butler? Will she have prudence enough to drop those black-fringed eyes, demurely as any nun, next time she meets Peter Monk in the village street, and hide that betrothed hand under her shawl, that his may not be reached out to clasp it any more? Will she cross over the road to get out of young Alick's way, or dive into the recesses of some friendly shop, if the tall footman looms in the

distance? And will she lay aside all her vain, flirtish ways, will she call up that far-hidden faithfulness, of which we spoke long ago, to guard, as it should be guarded, the beautiful gift, the brave heart which is all her own?

Bessie thinks she will.

CHAPTER III.



HAT little beam of sunlight which burnished the necks of Farmer Benson's drakes, as they paddled to and fro amongst the slime and sedge of the Meadowthorpe dyke, and then glancing upward, gilded Barnie Wilson's yellow-grey plaits, and cut such funny capers in the glass buttons of old Midgley's Sunday waistcoat, found itself in altogether a different line of life when it had travelled far enough up the road to reach the great oriel window in the south front of the Hall.

For there, at its very first entrance, it was half smothered in the heavy folds of a pair of crimson curtains, embroidered all over with little golden fleurs-de-lis, and when, stained through and through with ruby tint, it had worked its passage

over these, it struck upon the broad shoulders of a gentleman who was sitting with his back to the window. From the gentleman's shoulders it wandered to the rich carved work of an old oak sideboard, on which stood many a piece of family plate—tankards, ewers, salvers, finely-chased beakers and liqueur stands. And from the sideboard to some bronzes, chiefly classic, which filled the recesses on each side the massive marble chimney-piece. And from the bronzes to the black dress of a lady, who was sitting at the head of the table ; a tall, portly lady, with a black lace kerchief thrown over her grey hair, and a mourning brooch gathering some folds of transparent muslin round her once graceful, but now somewhat angular shoulders. Next it tried the crimson-covered table, where it crept over half-a dozen Ribston pippins that were lying snugly enough amongst some vine leaves on a very old-fashioned china plate, such china as Miss Vere Aubrey would have given almost half a year's income to call her own. There was another plate, heaped up with walnuts, and a couple of heavy, cut-glass decanters, which broke up its light into a thousand shining sparkles ; but the little sunbeam hurried past these to twinkle

over the white fingers of a very beautiful young lady, and to nestle itself in the golden tendrils of her hair, where it staid, making those tendrils look still more golden and dazzling.

The gentleman with broad shoulders was Mr. Rivers, the new steward of Meadowthorpe ; the tall lady, with a black lace square over her head, was his mother, Mrs. Rivers, a widow for more than twenty years ; the young lady with golden hair was Noelline Rivers, sister to the broad-shouldered gentleman ;—unmarried, and therefore, as Mrs. Narrowby said to herself at church that morning, a most eligible match for Longden. Only that the mischievous little beam of sunlight, as it played over Noelline's white and taper fingers, flashed upon a costly diamond ring, doubtless placed there by some far away lover, until such time as he should be permitted to exchange it for a plain one. That ring was destined to damp Mrs. Narrowby's hopes sadly before long.

They appeared to be idling away the time in a cosy after-dinner fashion, chatting over Meadowthorpe possibilities, whether or not they should succeed in making a pleasant thing of life down amongst the rustics of this out-of-the-way little village.

Noelline, however, had nearly all the conversation to herself. Mr. Rivers and his mother were not at all sociable people; the elder lady, because by long habit her mind had become reticent and introverted; Gavin, because his own rich, strong, genial nature found but little response from the colder temperaments of his mother and sister.

The new steward might be capable of great things. That remained to be proved. This afternoon the little sunbeam, which seemed disposed to make such good use of its detective powers, found him busily engaged in building a castle of walnut shells. Noelline was following his example, and between them, on a vine leaf, lay a Ribstone pippin; the largest they could find, destined to be the reward of the most skilful architect. You would have thought that Noelline's slender fingers would have had the best chance of success when matched with his, which were made to correspond with the rest of him—broad, strong, sinewy. Not so, though. Over and over again she tried; but her tower always fell before it reached half the height of Gavin's. At last, with a pretty musical laugh, finding that she could not rise above it, she felled her brother's tiny castle with a frag-

ment of walnut shell, scattering its ruins all over the crimson-embroidered table-cover.

“There,” she said, in that low, sweet voice of hers, that voice which had intoned the responses so beautifully a few hours before, “you have beaten me this afternoon, but some day I will beat you.”

“Just as you like,” Gavin replied. Then, taking up the Ribstone pippin and opening the window, he threw it across the garden to a little boy, the shepherd’s youngest son, who was playing close to the fountain pond with a huge Newfoundland dog.

Was that idle after-dinner sport the symbol of another game to be played by Noelline Rivers ere long, when with a touch apparently as light and careless, she should shiver to fragments a structure of quite other than walnut shells? But what could possibly bring such a thought as that into anyone’s mind. The new steward’s sister, sitting there in the great dining-room, the sunlight playing over her delicate features and pale golden hair, looks as if she would not willingly hurt a mouse, still less do anything to injure her own brother. She is so very sweet and amiable and gentle, “so perfectly the lady,” as Miss Vere Aubrey says,

Perhaps a very acute observer might not like that occasional spasmoid contraction of the clearly arched brows. To a physiognomist it might indicate treachery. But there is no need that it should indicate anything of the sort to us.

When the fragments of walnut shells were cleared away, a long pause ensued. Noelline was the first to break it.

“Mamma, do you remember the name of that poor, unhappy lady who came over with us in the *Janita*?”

Mrs. Rivers turned a pair of dreamy, dark grey eyes upon her daughter, but she said nothing. For more than an hour she had been sitting at the head of the table, just as she sat now, motionless, silent, absorbed in a sort of reverie, taking no notice of anything that was said, nor of the by-play which had passed between “the children,” as she still called them.

“I mean that unhappy lady, mamma, who you said appeared to be weighed down by some great sorrow. What was her name?”

“Mrs. Raeburn, I believe.”

And having said this, Mrs. Rivers turned her great eyes back again to the garden, and her lips

folded themselves once more into the still, passive expression which had become habitual.

“Ah! I remember,” said Gavin. “Dear me, what a long long time it is since I thought anything about her. Margaret Ruthven Raeburn; that was the name they painted on her coffin. How well I remember seeing that coffin go sliding down into the water, whilst the clergyman read the service, and that old Scotchwoman stood by the bulwarks, holding the poor little baby in her arms.”

“Poor little wretch!” said Noelline, carelessly. “But, mamma, did you ever find out who the lady was, and whether she really was a lady, or only a—an unfortunate, you know?”

Once more Mrs. Rivers turned.

“Mrs. Raeburn told me nothing of her history, and I never ask questions. Besides, had I ever known I should most likely have forgotten. Your father has been dead now for one-and-twenty years, and it was the anniversary of his interment when we embarked in the *Janita*.”

“Yes, Noelline,” said Gavin, “for I was only fourteen; my birthday was on board, the same day the baby was christened. I mind it very

well, because I stood a sort of godfather to it. That old nurse wanted it to be called Hepzibah or Kerenhappuch, or some such outlandish name, and the captain, in a joke, asked me if I could think of anything prettier."

"And you thought of Janita."

"Yes; there was a bit of tarpaulin lying near with the ship's name on it, and I just said it without ever thinking what I was doing. But they did call the baby Janita though, a curious colour to sail under all her life."

"It might have been worse. And how you used to carry that child about, as if it really belonged to you. The Scotchwoman said you put the glamour over it. It would lie in your arms so quietly, but if anyone else took it, it set up such a wretched miserable wail. And I remember—at least—perhaps it was our old nurse that told me—"

"Ah, now, Noelline, you need not be so particular about letting your age be known. Why, if we left Rio twenty years ago, you would be just eight years old, and people at twenty-eight ought to remember what happened when they were eight years old."

"But I don't look eight-and-twenty," said Noelline, stroking her beautiful golden hair with those jewelled fingers, "and I don't mean to own to it either. You are always contriving to remind me of *my* age, because at four-and-thirty you look old enough to marry mamma."

"It is of very little consequence to a man how old he looks; indeed it is often a gain to him when he appears in advance of his years. I dare-say these Meadowthorpe people will credit me for forty-five, and I shall not undeceive them. But, Noelline, whatever have you raked up all this old story for, about the unhappy lady and the poor little stray waif of a bairnie?"

"Because I believe I have made a little bit of a discovery, Mr. Gavin. You remember the young girl who sat in the pew next to us at church this morning."

"Yes, between a bald-headed gentleman with blue spectacles and a strong-minded female with brown ribbons and a false front. Yes, I do remember her. I am afraid she thought I had been to sleep during the sermon, because when I opened my eyes after a reverie she was looking at me so reproachfully, I quite longed to say, 'If

you please, young lady, I have only been meditating.' ”

“ Well, I mean to make a practice of going to sleep as long as I stop in this place; such a dry stick of a clergyman, and such an ugly old church, and such an unmitigatedly stupid set of people. Gavin, we shall be smothered alive with them, we shall indeed,” and Noelline put up her white fingers to hide a yawn. “ But about the young lady; you know she passed us a hymn-book because we only had one amongst the three of us, and when I turned the leaves over to the beginning, as I always do with lent hymn-books, there was the name, ‘ Janita Raeburn,’ in a clear, fine sort of woman’s hand.”

“ Ha! that was strange. And did you look at the young girl afterwards, to see if there was any resemblance between her and poor Mrs. Raeburn?”

“ Gavin, why will you keep talking in that way? I tell you I *cannot* remember a face twenty years back. Mrs. Raeburn might have been an angel, or an ogress, for anything I know. I did tread on your toes though, to get you to look at her, but you were too much absorbed in your propriety to pay any attention.”

“But how old did she look? You know that little waif must be twenty now, if she is living at all, which is unlikely enough, considering how she got tossed and tumbled about before the vessel landed.”

“I don’t know about her age, and I don’t know about her looks either. She was quite an ordinary girl, with largish eyes and dark hair, I think. I should never have noticed her at all but for that name. It would be strange rather, you know, if, after all these years, your little nursling should come to light again. Mamma, did *you* look at the young girl in the next pew this morning?”

Mrs. Rivers, absorbed in her own thoughts, had not heard a word of what was passing between her children. Very gravely she turned her cold eyes upon Noelline.

“I never notice what passes in church. You know that very well, I believe.”

And with these words she rose and passed out of the room, her long black dress trailing after her, her hands folded rigidly over the heavy jet chain which girded her waist. Noelline went away very soon after into a cosy little boudoir at the west corner of the house, where, with Tip, a

favourite Skye-terrier, on her knee, she was soon fast asleep.

When they were both gone, Gavin Rivers began to walk up and down the room. It was a great habit of his, that walking up and down rooms. Almost every carpet in the house bore his mark upon it in the shape of a track worn from end to end by his heavy footsteps. And whilst he is taking his afternoon exercise in that fashion, with folded arms and head slightly bent down, we will find out a little more about his home life.

CHAPTER IV.

HE Rivers's were not what is generally called a very united family. Had they not happened to be relations, they would certainly never have sought each other as friends, for there was little sympathy in their natures, and none in their pursuits. Theirs was blood relationship, nothing more.

Not that the new steward and his mother and sister quarrelled with each other. You must not think that. There was never any outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual estrangement which existed between them. You might have lived with them for years without hearing one of those hasty petulant expressions which are often exchanged between members of the same family who do, nevertheless, love each other very

earnestly ; but neither would you in all that time have perceived the silent interchange of look, or the unconscious sympathy of heart with heart which a single word is sufficient to reveal. The inner life of each of them, whatever that life might be, beautiful or unlovely, was lived in perfect solitude.

This was scarcely their own fault. At least it was not the fault of Gavin and his sister. For the mere fact of living in a house together, year after year, can never produce sympathy where the true relationship of mind has been withheld. It is not sleeping under the same roof, or sitting at the same table, or gathering night by night round the same fireside, and hearing the same mother's voice, that makes true brotherhood and true sisterhood ; but it is thinking the same thoughts, having the same life purpose, looking for the same hereafter. And in none of these things did the Hall family agree.

A strange home it was, betraying neither unity nor discord. A home in which no kiss was ever exchanged, no tender hand-clasp given, no word spoken which had reference to other than the outside matters of daily social life. A home from

which all outward show of grief and gladness had long ago been put away. And yet in one heart at least there was so much of rich genial vitality, so much power of loving and suffering; one heart which, if it only had room to live its true life, could have filled that great love-emptied house with the bright sunshine of human kindness. But the Hall people kept their emotions and affections snugly covered up beneath what Miss Vere Aubrey was pleased to call "such a very superior tone, such very aristocratic composure, quite peculiar to the upper classes." A sort of tone and composure which go along with carved oak sideboards, and family plate, and hereditary bronzes.

Mr. Rivers, the elder, had held a Government appointment at Rio. There the two children were born, there for several years Mrs. Rivers lived a very brilliant life. Beautiful and graceful, she was the idol of the place, the star of its entertainments, the leader of its gaieties. But it was not only as a woman of fashion that Mrs. Rivers shone. Possessing a vivid fancy and a richly cultivated mind, she gathered round her the choicest people of Rio, both English and Portuguese, and reigned supreme amongst them. No conversation so spark-

ling as hers, no repartee so racy and pungent. No literary gathering or fashionable assembly was considered complete without her presence. In vain the Portuguese nobility, or the wealthy English residents sought to make their entertainments pass off successfully, unless the charming Mrs. Rivers could be secured to grace them by her beauty, and enliven them by her wit. She was the queen of society, and never did any queen reign over more willing subjects.

From this brilliant career she was driven into retirement by the sudden death of her husband. Of quick ardent affections, she mourned him passionately. She withdrew from Rio to a quiet place a few miles distant, where she shut herself completely out from all her former friends, allowing no one to visit her but a few Portuguese nuns from the neighbouring convent. Into her warm, grief-softened heart, they poured such consolation as their faith afforded. They fed her glowing imagination with the old legends of the saints. They told her how many a woman, fair and beautiful as herself, had cast away affection's snares to become the bride of Christ. They told her of inward raptures and spiritual revelations vouch-

safed by God to the soul which lived in solitary communion with Him. They told her of mystic joys attained by those holy women who, thrusting from them as mere earthly passions the love of home, and husband, and children, passed their lives in pious meditations, apart from the world's joys or sorrows; winning angelic raptures compared with which the purest of human pleasures were but dust and ashes.

The Portuguese nuns found in Mrs. Rivers an apt scholar. She came out from her seclusion a complete quietist, insensible as any Santa Teresa of old to the sweetness of human emotions or friendships. In doctrine she still held to the faith of her ancestors, in practice she became a mystic. But for her children, she would have joined the nuns in their convent, and spent the rest of her life in holy dreaming. Fortunately, however, duty compelled to the work which love could no longer win from her. A twelvemonth after the death of Mr. Rivers, she brought Gavin and Noelline home to Scotland for their education, taking her passage in the same vessel which gave to poor Mrs. Raeburn a death-couch, and to Janita a cradle.

Mrs. Rivers lived in complete retirement near

Edinburgh, whither she had gone for the sake of placing Gavin at the High School. Noelline, at ten years of age, was sent to a school in France, where she remained nine years. Soon after her return, Gavin obtained the stewardship of an estate in Devonshire, belonging to the Duke of Dykeland. Thither the entire family removed, and there they remained until the death of the Meadowthorpe steward brought them to a new home.

Mrs. Rivers acted the part of a mother to her children in giving them a liberal education and sustaining their position in the rank to which they were born. But this was all. She never conversed freely with them, she never trained them to confide in her, she never caressed them or suffered them to caress her. After Noelline's return from France, she was allowed to assume the conduct of the household, whilst Mrs. Rivers spent her time in meditations, or reading the Lives of the Saints. Her children only knew her as a woman of calm, passive demeanour, never angry, never impatient, never excited; a woman whom no grief could move to tears, no wrong to indignation, no joy to smiles. Of the real character of her son and daughter she knew nothing; of hers they knew as little.

That was the home life of the Rivers family.

Noelline had all her mother's youthful grace and beauty, with a certain wily seductiveness which she had acquired in French society. Everyone was charmed with her. She was so graceful, so winning, so popular. She was not a woman who cared for sympathy, but she desired admiration, and she gained what she sought. Noelline had two aims in life. One was to establish herself successfully, to obtain a good position in society as the wife of a wealthy, well-connected man. She had been trying for some years to accomplish this, and at last succeeded; for only a few months before the family came to Meadowthorpe, Colonel Gore, younger son of a baronet, had made her an offer, and they were to be married in the autumn. For herself, then, Noelline was quite content.

The second aim was to get her brother married into a rich and aristocratic family. In this she had not as yet succeeded, though ever since her return from France, she had been using every means to accomplish it. One thing, however, she had managed. The right lady had not been found, but the wrong one had been disposed of; thus far Noelline's tact had served her well. Her brother was unentangled at

present ; so she intended him to remain, until an eligible alliance offered. Gavin's marriage might be happy, Miss Rivers quite hoped it would ; but wealthy and aristocratic it *must* be, even if the little matter of happiness had to be put aside.

There, Noelline, we have done with you for the present. Step aside, and make room for the new steward of Meadowthorpe.

The outward look of him you have seen already, as he sat in the Hall pew this morning. About the middle height, broad, strongly built, hair a little tinged with grey ; thin, dark beard, through which the outline of his face may be seen clearly enough ; straight eyebrows, overhanging eyes, whose exact colour no one can tell, for sometimes they look blue, sometimes brown ; and a complexion from which twenty years of English damp has not been able to bleach the dark stain of tropic sunshine.

Gavin Rivers was his father's boy, energetic, persevering, rather impetuous, full of courage, firm almost to obstinacy,—quite to obstinacy, his sister thought, for she found him hard to manage sometimes,—yet not without that tenderness which underlies the strength of every true man. There was that about Gavin Rivers which made poor women

ask for "the master" when they came to the house with a tale of sorrow to tell ; which made the little ragged street-children look up into his face with a smile, knowing that he would not overturn their mud castles, or kick away their marbles, or put himself maliciously in the way of their hoops ; which made Leo, the great Newfoundland dog, sit at his feet for hours, with its shaggy muzzle thrust into his hand, and its patient eyes fixed on him with a look of loving trust, which Noelline, try as she might, could never win. That half-understood and quite unexplainable quality, without which no man is worthy of the name he bears, having which he may lack many accomplishments and a few virtues yet be a very precious friend—that quality the new steward possessed.

Long ago, Gavin Rivers was to have been married. He was engaged when his sister came home from France. Somehow it blew over ; why, no one knew except Noelline, and of course she never told. The young lady was dead now, so that the affair was quite settled. And ever since that time, Mr. Rivers had been reserved and very quiet, almost unpleasantly so, quite disinclined to go much into society, and when in it, not caring to

make himself particularly agreeable. But as Miss Rivers said, young ladies were often more taken with a man of that kind than with one who took pains to be popular, and therefore he was likely enough even yet to meet her views by an ambitious marriage.

Look at him as he paces that handsome dining-room, his arms folded over his chest, his head bent down ; you see his face is not at all a peaceful one, it is full of restrained action, of thoughts that can never work themselves into words or deeds ; the face of a man who has never known the sweetness of home, nor the blessedness of having some one to work for and take care of. He loves no one, no one loves him. No woman as she kneels to say her evening prayer, names his name in it ; if he died, no life would lose its sunshine. But he has work to do, plenty of tough hard work, more now than ever. The broad farmlands and level swamps of Dyke-land will not let a man sit idle, still less will those mud-built cottages and smoky hovels which Mr. Andrews, the clerk of the works, has told him about. Having work, then, let him be content for a season. Many men toil through a long life, finding no other content.

And this is the new cargo of aims and interests and hopes and possibilities which has been stranded on the sandy shores of the quiet little village of Meadowthorpe.

CHAPTER V.



HE appearance of Mr. Rivers with his mother and sister at Meadowthorpe church, was the signal for a volley of morning calls. Within a day or two of that appearance, Gentility Square feminine put on its new spring bonnet, and went to the Hall, and before another Sunday came round, everybody in the village who aspired to anything like an advanced degree of respectability, had deposited a card in the costly little filigree basket which stood on a bronze table in the pillared and carpeted entrance of Meadowthorpe Hall.

Early in the ensuing week, Mrs. Narrowby issued notes for a supernumerary working-party, not to the fellow-Christians in general, but only to the green baize portion of them; and at this supernumerary

working-party, the ladies who had called upon the new comers brought in their reports.

On the whole, those reports were favourable. The upper ten of Meadowthorpe were disposed to hold out the right hand of fellowship to the steward's family. Mrs. Rivers was quite the lady, peculiar rather and very distant, but still quite the lady. So those declared who had seen her; but few had been admitted to that privilege, for "Mamma is so very delicate, and scarcely ever sees company," Noelline had said, in those sweet silvery tones of hers, to nearly all the visitors. Miss Rivers, however, was charming, *so* elegant and affable, everyone agreed; was so pleased with the place and the people, and so disposed to be friendly. And she admired the church so, and thought Mr. Mabury was such an excellent preacher, and the service was so perfectly done that really it was quite a pleasure to attend; and it was so kind of the dear people to call upon them so early, and to pay them so much attention; and she was sure they would soon learn to love Meadowthorpe very much. Yes, Miss Rivers gave perfect satisfaction to everyone. Miss Vere Aubrey thought that both the ladies' faces indicated a pedigree. You never saw eyes with those clear arched

brows, apart from Norman descent. Mr. Rivers, she inclined to think, could only be half brother ; there was not the remotest family resemblance between them. Possibly South American blood was in his veins ; those lurid eyes, and that swarthy complexion, were unmistakeably foreign.

And then about the furniture and appointments ; they were beyond all praise, in such perfect good taste, so suited to the spirit of the place. That fine old oak suite in the dining-room—the door was open as Mrs. Narrowby passed it—and the carpets, real Turkey she was quite sure—and those family portraits on the staircase. Miss Vere Aubrey did so like to see family portraits on a stair-case, it gave such tone to a house ; you never saw an upstart family with portraits on the stair-case. Mrs. Rivers's lace, too, real English point, as Miss Matilda soon found out, none of your modern imitation, washed in coffee-grounds to give it a colour ; and the tiger-skin mats, Mrs. Macturk always approved of tiger-skin mats, they gave a house such an oriental appearance, and reminded her so of her dear husband's bungalow up at Trichinopoly. And then that beautiful conservatory, so tasteful—but, however, the conclusion of the whole matter was this,

that Meadowthorpe had received a valuable addition to its social advantages in the arrival of the new steward.

Miss Hepzibah Ruthven called at the Hall too, and returned, as everyone else returned, in a state of exuberant satisfaction. During conversation she discovered that the elder Mr. Rivers, who died at Rio more than twenty years ago, was a Scottish gentleman, and had been a fellow-student of her brother's at the St. Andrew's University. So nothing would serve her but the Professor must make acquaintance with the son of his old fellow-student; and as the Professor always did as his sister told him, he actually rummaged out a card and trotted down with it to Meadowthorpe Hall, where, to his own surprise, he staid for more than an hour, chatting with the new steward about old names and old places and old friends, of whom Mr. Rivers had heard his father speak. So that everything promised fairly for a pleasant degree of intimacy between the Hall and the Aspens.

A few days of solemn silence ensued, and then came the return calls. Such peeping over blinds, and behind curtains, and out of side windows as there was that week in the quiet little village of

Meadowthorpe, when the Hall carriage woke the echoes of its one long straggling street. Such wondering and excitement as disturbed Gentility Square when at some of its doors the footman only jumped down and left cards, whilst at others—Mrs. Mabury's and Miss Vere Aubrey's amongst the number—the chestnut horses stood prancing and pawing for nearly half an hour. And such comparing of notes when those chestnut horses had whirled the crested equipage with its occupants away back to Meadowthorpe Hall. If Miss Rivers won the hearts of the people before, she completely enslaved them now; for she was so charmingly frank and unaffected. She showed such lively interest in the village, kissed and flattered the babies at Mrs. Mabury's, went into raptures over Miss Vere Aubrey's old china cups, which she was sure were the most exquisite she had ever seen, quite superior to anything they had at the Hall; inquired so very kindly of Miss Narrowby about the working-party, and was so disappointed they had not felt sufficiently at home with her to invite her to join them, there was nothing she liked so much as making herself useful in that sort of way, and she hoped they would not forget to send her a note the very

next time; won Mrs. Macturk's lasting esteem by her unrestrained expressions of admiration for the ugly little dog which lay curled up all in a lump on the velvet pile rug; and entwined herself round Miss Hepzibah's affections by the desire which she manifested to know how strawberries were preserved whole. In short, she made herself a universal favourite, as almost any woman may who has tact enough to perceive the little weaknesses of human nature, and not honesty enough to keep her from playing upon them.

Next time the Hall people went to church, Gavin looked more closely at the young face in the Professor's pew, but only to come to the conclusion that this Janita, if the book did indeed belong to her, could not be the ocean-born waif of his boyish memory, the little motherless baby, whose fretful wailings he had so often stilled. *That* Janita was twenty years of age now, a woman quite. Gavin remembered well enough what a woman Noelline was when at nineteen she came home from Paris; this girl from her looks, and the unschooled freedom of her ways, could not be more than seventeen, perhaps not so much as that. Besides, in those bright, animated, expressive features, changing with every

changing thought, there was not the faintest reproduction of the wan, sad face of poor Mrs. Raeburn, that face which never softened into the semblance of a smile, or told of anything but weary, hopeless sorrow. For neither Gavin Rivers nor his mother, nor Noelline, had known Mrs. Raeburn other than as she was on that miserable voyage, when, pressed down with the weight of her untold grief, she would pace the deck alone for hours and hours. They could not look back a few months earlier, and see her the gay, petted, beautiful girl wife, whose winning smile and frank, pleasant ways were all her child had inherited. Miss Hepzibah had not taken her niece with her when she called at the Hall, and Miss Rivers, remembering her visitor's spinsterhood, had wisely refrained from inquiries about the health of her family, otherwise Miss Hepzibah would doubtless have given her a full, perfect, and minute description of Janita's fever, and the preliminary bit of excitement, together with a flying sketch of her early history, and the circumstances of her coming to Meadowthorpe. And the Professor, too, was not in the habit of speaking about family matters; so that for the present, for anything the Hall family

knew, the “ordinary-looking girl, with dark hair and largish eyes,” might only be a visitor at the Aspens.

It was about three weeks after his arrival at Meadowthorpe, that Gavin Rivers went to see Professor Ruthven for the first time. In the evening, too, for he knew they kept no company, and he was less likely at that time than at any other to interrupt the Professor’s pursuits. Bessie showed him into the drawing-room, rather shadowy now, for the clump of aspens in the middle of the garden always blocked out the later rays of sunlight at that time of the year.

It was a seedy, outworn apartment, whose faded tabouret hangings, and cracked old china punch-bowls, and tarnished remains of what had once been gilding on the door-panels and round the cornice, rather called forth respect for former grandeur than admiration for present beauty. But as Miss Hepzibah said, what was the use of fine rooms? So long as a house had proper conveniences for cooking, and plenty of pantry and store room, that was all she cared about. People who liked to hamper themselves with such rubbish might get together pictures, and looking-glasses,

and vases, *she* shouldn't waste her property in anything so foolish. So the drawing-room at the Aspens was a practical commentary on Miss Hepzibah's text. The only pretty thing it contained, and that was there by sufferance, was a group of wild flowers, primroses, hyacinths, and forget-me-nots, with some fern leaves and flowering grasses, which Janita had arranged in the form of a pyramid, the base of the structure being an old dinner-plate, fringed round with ivy-leaves, upon that a saucer, turned upside down, on that, again, a deep glass, from which heads of oat-grass drooped like a fountain over the delicate primroses and the clear, sharp outline of the ivy-leaves. Janita had spent half an hour in putting it into shape, only the day before—greatly to the inward annoyance of Miss Hepzibah, who disapproved of such a waste of time, it was sinful, she said—and when it was done, the young girl thought it was about as pretty as anything she had ever seen.

Evidently Mr. Rivers thought so too, for he examined it so intently, lifting up the leaves here and there to inform himself of the interior structure, that he was quite unaware of the presence of

Janita, who had come in quietly, and was now standing in the middle of the room, in painful uncertainty as to what she ought to do. Which uncertainty Mr. Rivers appeared to share, when, turning round at last, he found himself face to face, not with a bald-headed, dried-up specimen of professorial humanity, but a young lady, who in her simple dress of tartan plaid, and with shining hair pushed away from her broad, low forehead, after the fashion she used to wear it in Scotland, appeared to him anything but "ordinary."

If Janita had been a properly educated, finished person, like Miss Vere Aubrey, or the diamond-shaped Miss Narrowby, she would have requested her visitor to be seated, and then she would have entertained him with a series of remarks upon the weather, past, present, and future. But Janita was not at all finished, and instead of conducting herself in the above-mentioned manner, she stood by the table, crumpling her tartan sash, and feeling very undecided as to the proper mode of action; which indecision resulted, at last, in a slightly ungrammatical sentence about the Professor being engaged just then, but if Mr. Rivers would not mind waiting a few minutes:—after that, not

knowing exactly how to wind up, she began to crumple her sash again. For she remembered how rude she had been at church, and how vexed she had felt when, waking from his reverie, the stranger had detected her criticising his face. However, he did not appear to cherish any ill-feeling towards her on that account, for he said, kindly enough—

“Pray do not apologise. I hope the Professor will not hurry himself on my account.” And then, as if to float her over this awkward reef of shyness, he added—“I was employing myself very pleasantly in examining your flowers. I suppose you arranged them?”

Janita felt herself in deep water now; she could always find something to say about flowers. Besides, his manner reassured her, it was so quietly unconscious.

“Yes, I did them; but I could not make them look so pretty as I wanted, because there are so few wild flowers about here, and Aunt Hepzibah does not wish me to pluck flowers out of the garden; you know she likes to take care of the seeds.”

Hepzibah. Yes, that was one of the names—a

family name, old Ilsie said—that had been suggested for the little ocean strayling. But Janita was too busy pointing out her different ferns and grasses, to notice the rather scrutinising look which Mr. Rivers bent upon her.

“Now it was so different in Scotland, the wild flowers there were so beautiful, and the mosses in Inverallan woods—oh! how I did miss those mosses when I came to Meadowthorpe.”

“Then this is not your own country?”

“Oh! no. I belong to Scotland. I am very glad I do not belong to this flat, stupid old place. I have only lived with Uncle Ruthven a few months, not a year yet. My home used to be at Inverallan. Do you know Inverallan?”

“Indeed; then the Professor is your uncle. I imagined you were only a visitor at the Aspens.”

“No, he is not my uncle; he was poor mamma’s uncle, though.”

So she was an orphan. Gavin Rivers could tell that by the unconscious sadness with which she said the words, “poor mamma.”

“But,” she went on, with a little touch of impatience, “you have not told me yet whether you know Inverallan. Is it not a pretty place?”

“Yes,” he said, smiling at her girlish eagerness, so different from the graceful composure of his sister Noelline’s manner; so much prettier, he thought. “I do know Inverallan, at least I have passed through it sometimes, but, to my taste, there are many nooks in Scotland more beautiful than Inverallan glen. I suppose though there is always a certain charm about one’s native place. However far we get away from it afterwards, we like to come back and linger round about it.”

“It would be rather difficult then for me to linger round about my native place, for I was born at sea.”

“Were you though? And was it in latitude 25?”

“Yes, so Ilsie, that is our old nurse, told me.”

“And was the ship’s name *Janita*?”

“Yes. Oh, I think I know now!” and the young girl’s face began to light up.

“And did that old nurse of yours tell you about a little boy named Gavin Rivers, who used to carry you about on deck when you were such a naughty, restless baby? And did she——”

“Yes, yes. Ah now I know it all! You are

the boy Gavin, and your sister is the little fairy girl with golden hair that Ilsie told me of, and Mrs. Rivers is the lady that was so good to poor mamma. Oh! I am so glad I have found you again."

And Janita, whose shyness was all gone, had kept coming nearer and nearer to Mr. Rivers, until at last she felt her two hands held fast in his, in a way that would have been perfectly shocking to Miss Hepzibah could she have seen it.

But that worthy lady did not see it. She was in the still-room, superintending a jelly operation, and if the Duke of Dykeland himself had been waiting her presence in the drawing-room, there he might have waited, for not one step would Miss Hepzibah have stirred from her gas stove until the precious mixture had manifested signs of thickening.

"You know," Janita continued, "when first I heard your name, I wondered very much if you were really the same Gavin Rivers that Ilsie told me about; but then you looked too old. That Gavin would have been thirty-four now, and I should have thought you had been such a great deal more than that when I saw you in church."

Mr. Rivers was more and more amused with the quaint simplicity of her words and manners. And yet it was very refreshing. He felt as if, after walking for a long time amongst the well-behaved, carefully-tended plants of some very trim garden, he had come at last unawares upon a little cluster of wild flowers that had sprung up of their own accord and were just flowering after their own pretty fashion. He was still holding Janita's hands in his, studying her bright eager face, all over smiles now, when the door opened, and Professor Ruthven came in.

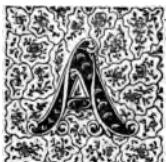
"Child," said Gavin, and it seemed to him as if he could have stooped down and stroked that white forehead and smoothed the shining hair again as he used to do twenty years ago. "Child, I must know more of you; you must come and see us soon, my sister shall bring you to the Hall."

Just the very last thing that Noelline Rivers had any intention of doing.

But the Professor had groped his way into the middle of the room now, and was beginning, in a very hazy, abstracted sort of way, to apologise for having kept Mr. Rivers so long waiting. And Janita, finding that she could slip out unobserved,

hurried away to Miss Alwyne's, and was soon sitting at her feet in that little bay-windowed room, telling her all about it.

CHAPTER VI.



FTER the return calls there was a second solemn interval, during which Gentility Square considered the propriety of offering its hospitalities to the Hall family.

Mrs. Mabury led the way with a very elegant little dinner party, only numbering, besides the Rivers' family, Mr. and Mrs. Narrowby, one or two officers from the barracks, the Dean of St. Olave's, and his daughter Elene, a blonde, serene, tranquil beauty of seven-and-twenty. After the ice was thus broken, a succession of festivities followed, varying in character from Mrs. Mac-turk's ball, which, for the magnificence of its decorations, done by a first-rate St. Olave's hand, and the elegance of its supper, ordered from London, deserved a paragraph in the *Morning Chronicle*,—

to Miss Vere Aubrey's eight o'clock dinner, where the tiny block of salmon was served upon a silver gilt dish, capacious enough for a sirloin of beef, and the attenuated Marsala made a feeble attempt to sparkle in ancestral wine glasses, crested, but very tapering at the bottom.

Miss Hepzibah Ruthven turned the matter over in her own mind and decided not to give a set party to the strangers. Such things, she said, were out of her line, though she had no doubt she could set the new steward and his mother and sister down to as good a dinner as would be served to them anywhere, not excepting even the bishop's palace. But if Mrs. and Miss Rivers could make it agreeable to come in any evening, they would always find a cup of tea ready for them about six o'clock; and if Mr. Rivers would take a friendly knife and fork at supper, the Professor would be very happy to see him; only it must be in a very friendly way, no ceremony, brother Jabez could not do with ceremony at all.

Miss Hepzibah said as much as this to Miss Rivers in her second call. To which wholesale, free and easy invitation, Noelline had replied in her very sweetest manner, that there was nothing she

enjoyed so much as visiting in that friendly way, and she was so much obliged to dear Miss Ruthven for excusing her from a formal party, they really had been to so many since they came to Meadowthorpe, she was quite weary of them ; and she should be *so* happy to bring her work to the Aspens and spend a long evening. And she would be sure to tell Gavin about the Professor's kind message—which, however, she never did—and she had no doubt he would be delighted to come in now and then ; together with a great deal more to the same effect. So that Miss Hepzibah came away in high spirits, declaring that the new steward's sister was the most charming person she had seen for years ; indeed she felt her heart quite warm towards her, for she seemed to take everyone into her friendship so, and was so anxious to make herself agreeable to the people. And after that call, before ever she took off her bonnet and shawl, Miss Hepzibah went into the store room and chose out two moulds of her richest damson cheese, and sent them down to the Hall with her compliments.

That was what Noelline said in her very sweetest manner, as she sat in the great drawing-room

amongst the bronzes and the silver salvers, and the family portraits, wishing all the while that Miss Hepzibah would make haste and go away. And when Miss Hepzibah had gone away, Noelline took little Tip, the Skye-terrier, on her lap, and began to open her mind to him, as she often did when they were alone together.

“Very fine, Tip, is it not? As if I should drop in to tea with the old cook. And we don’t want to taste her jellies, do we? poor old lady! And as for Gavin taking a knife and fork with the Professor—we know better than that, Tip, don’t we?”

To which Tip replied, “Of course we do, my lady.” At least if he did not say the exact words, he winked his little black eyes and turned his head cunningly on one side, which meant the same thing. Tip was very fond of his mistress. I believe there was a great deal of communion between them, and I am quite sure she told him many things which the world in general never got to know. Tip was a judicious confidant. He never told secrets; he never betrayed those little matters which Noelline whispered as she laid her golden curls upon his ugly black neck. No, a wink of those sagacious

eyes, an intelligent wag of the long silky ears, and all was safe.

“For we understand each other so well, don’t we, Tip?”

Miss Alwyne gave the new steward and his sister a very pretty little entertainment. Not ostentatious in the least ; there was neither glitter of plate, nor sparkle of ancestral wine-glasses to any extent worth mentioning. In fact, it was neither more nor less than a very modest six o’clock tea, with supper at eleven. And for the supper, besides sherry and other light wines, there were only two couples of fowls, which, during their short span of life, had cackled in Mr. Benson’s farm-yard, and some very unpretentious pastry, such as you might have eaten at almost any respectable house in the parish. Scarcely worth sitting down to, as Mrs. Macturk said, when Mrs. Narrowby stepped across the next morning to tell her about it. But then Mrs. Macturk had spent nearly thirty pounds on her ball and decorations, so that it was not to be expected she should express herself in other than a mildly deprecating manner respecting a supper which had hardly cost so many shillings.

And yet, neither Mrs. Macturk's thirty guinea ball, nor Mrs. Mabury's select dinner, nor Mrs. Narrowby's quadrille party, nor the Misses Vere Aubrey's salmon entertainment, was half so *distinguè*, or left half such a pleasant impression behind it, as Miss Alwyne's modest little tea and supper. For she happened to have two friends staying with her at the time, who were going the round of the English cathedrals, and had taken Meadowthorpe in their way from St. Olave's to the abbey church of Muchmarsh, farther down amongst the lowlands. One of them was a popular artist, whose praise was in all the London circles; the other a distinguished literary man, Miss Alwyne's patron, when she commenced her own career. And these guests cast a lustre over Meadowthorpe Cottage that evening which neither glitter of plate, nor sparkle of crystal, nor costly array of liveried footmen, hired out 'by the day, could ever have done; a lustre which as Gentility Square could not outshine, it did well to despise.

Besides the gentleman from London, there were Canon Hewlet, and his grand - niece, Elene Somers, Mr. Rivers and his sister—Mrs. Rivers, after accepting one or two invitations, had with-

drawn from general visiting on the plea of ill health—the diamond-shaped Miss Narrowby, with her mamma and Longden. A very small party; but, as Mrs. Narrowby observed during the evening, with a slightly envious glance towards the distinguished London strangers, who had declined an invitation to Gablehouse, “When people live in nutshells, they must entertain their friends accordingly.”

Janita was there, too, though. I had forgotten her. It was the first time she had ever met Miss Rivers, for Miss Hepzibah did not make a practice of taking her niece out with her, and she was spending the day at Miss Alwyne’s when the Hall people made their first call at the Aspens. True, they had often passed and re-passed each other on the St. Olave’s road, and each knew well enough who the other was; but, being un-introduced, any advance towards further acquaintance was, of course, out of the question. And so it happened that, standing on the moss and primrose carpet in that same little bay-windowed room where she and Longden had so often chatted together, Janita made her first bow to Miss Rivers, and felt her hand held in those white, taper fingers, which, she

knew not why, sent a sort of chill through her, and heard a silver-sweet voice, say—

“So delighted to see Miss Raeburn. You know, Miss Alwyne, our acquaintance had such a *very* romantic commencement; my brother has told me all about it. And”—here the dark eyes were turned on Janita again—“I am *so* sorry we have not seen you at the Hall yet, but our time has been so fully engaged, everyone has been so kind to us, you know. I do mean, though, to come very soon, and bring you to spend a long day with us. We ought to be such good friends, ought we not?”

Janita did not know exactly what to say. She wished very much there was no Miss Rivers. But answer was needless, for with a graceful sweep of the golden ringlets, Noelline glided away, linking her arm in that of her brother. She was afraid if she left him behind, he would be hovering about Janita, and that was the very thing he must not do. And to prevent him from doing it, she led him up to Elene Somers, and engaged him in a conversation with that tranquil representative of Close dignity.

Elene Somers was very sweet-looking, and very

highly connected, and very aristocratic in her manners. Besides being the Dean's daughter, she was grand-niece to one of the Resident Canons, and some relation to a baronet. Moreover, she had a fortune of several hundreds a year, inherited from her mother, who had been dead some time. The present Mrs. Somers had three or four children, but they could not touch Elene's property, that was secured to herself.

These, and one or two other little matters of a similar nature, Noelline had found out during that first dinner-party at the Rectory. Mrs. Narrowby had let them slip out inadvertently, in the course of conversation; and as the architect's lady was intimate with several of the Close families, besides having a sister married to the Dean's man of business, her information might be received as final.

Upon which premises Noelline formed a theory of her own. The Dean's daughter would make an admirable wife for the new steward of Meadowthorpe. Miss Rivers settled that in her own mind at Mrs. Mabury's dinner-party, as the fair-haired beauty of St. Olave's was wrapping her ermine cloak round her, and stepping into the carriage.

Gavin Rivers should marry Elene Somers. Miss Rivers settled that in her own mind as she sat in her little boudoir half an hour later, leaning her cheek on Tip's ugly black head. And that was why, instead of leaving her brother to talk to Janita Raeburn, she led him away to a comfortable seat by the side of the Dean's daughter, where she hoped he would remain most of the evening.

But Mrs. Narrowby had her own little theory too. And Mrs. Narrowby's little theory was this, that the steward's sister would make an admirable wife for her son Longden. Therefore, when a favourable opportunity offered, she slipped her white-gloved fingers into that lady's hand, and took her to the pretty little conservatory at the end of the cottage, where young Narrowby and Janita were talking in the easy, familiar way which had become habitual to them.

“Allow me to introduce my son. Mr. Longden Narrowby. Miss Rivers.”

Noelline extended the tips of her white gloves—was so sorry she had been from home when young Mr. Narrowby and his sister called at the Hall; hoped they would come again very soon; she should so like to show Miss Selina her collection of

South American grasses. Miss Selina was fond of botany, was she not? She loved botany herself, very much; it was a charming study, so improving.

Whereupon Mrs. Narrowby said that if Miss Rivers admired plants, she would enjoy looking at Miss Alwyne's beautiful show of azalias at the bottom of the garden. Longden would be so very happy to go with her, and the azalias were lovely, quite the finest in Meadowthorpe, except, perhaps, the new ones which had just been planted at the Hall. Would not Miss Rivers like to see them?

Of course Miss Rivers would like to see them very much; she had a passion for flowers, especially azalias; only she was afraid—this with such a pretty smile—that she was giving Mr. Longden a great deal of trouble. But everybody at Meadowthorpe was so kind. And then she took young Narrowby's offered arm, and went into the garden, casting a sidelong glance at Janita, to note how she bore the loss of her cavalier.

But Janita did not seem at all discomposed. One of the stranger-guests from London took the vacant place, and apparently found it a pleasant one, for he kept it until Miss Alwyne proposed

that they should all adjourn to the garden. Then the company broke up into little groups. Mr. Rivers relinquished Elene to Miss Selina Narrowby, and joined Janita and her artist companion in a stroll down the long walk, where we will leave them for the present.

Longden found his fair partner rather overpowering. He had been previously instructed to make himself as agreeable as possible. As Mrs. Narrowby said, when the invitation arrived—

“We shall meet the Hall people, depend upon it. Now, my dear boy, do make the most of your opportunities; you know everything depends upon a first impression. Not too marked, you understand, but politely attentive.”

And Longden, like a dutiful son as he was, did make the most of his opportunities. That is, he tried, first of all, the elegant little speeches with which he had generally won a blush or a simper from the young ladies at the St. Olave's balls—comparisons between pretty flowers and pretty faces, rose-leaves and rosy cheeks, and so on. But Miss Rivers neither blushed nor simpered, she only said with the gracefulest self-possession—

“Dear me, how charming! Mr. Longden, you

are really quite poetical. Do tell me that again, will you?"

And then he tried a few nicely-turned compliments about the welcome accession to Meadowthorpe society which the Duke of Dykeland had procured ; but these, too, were taken with the same easy nonchalance, Miss Rivers was evidently accustomed to be told that she was an accession wherever she went. At last Longden began to feel as if he had got hold of an air-ball, which, however much he squeezed it, always came back to the same shape again directly. And it was rather a relief than otherwise when, after half an hour's chat of this kind, Miss Rivers dropped his arm and rejoined Mrs. Narrowby in the drawing-room.

Mrs. Narrowby received her very graciously. She already began to feel quite a maternal interest in the new steward's beautiful sister—such a charming daughter-in-law she would make ! But Noelline had her own little purpose to serve in joining the architect's lady, and she lost no time in proceeding to business.

There are certain dispositions and tastes which stamp a woman of the lower middle class as

vulgar ; but when a lady, with white hands and golden hair, and general aristocratic outline of face, manifests the same dispositions, we wisely abstain from expressing an opinion about them. To stigmatise a lady with white hands, and golden hair, and general aristocratic outline of face, as vulgar, would be entirely improper. For instance, if the wife of that well-to-do tradesman of whom you buy your cheese and pickles, were to take the liberty of calling upon you, and bringing her fat, red face into close proximity with your own, and saying, in an easy, confidential tone—

“Oh ! Mrs. Blank, I have heard that your son is going to be married to Miss Such-a-one, and I said I would step in directly and ask you if it was true, you know I always feel an interest in young people getting engaged. Now *do* tell.”

You would write the woman down ignorant, unbearable, vulgar to a degree. And justly so. A woman who cannot preserve a becoming reticence on such matters as these, *is* unmistakeably vulgar. But you must not think of applying an epithet of that sort to Noelline Rivers, as she drops herself gracefully into the damask-covered *fauteuil*, her blue crape dress fluttering in vapoury clouds

around her, the silver wheat-ears in her hair trembling as if a summer breeze had passed over them.

“Ah! my dear Mrs. Narrowby, it is so pleasant to sit down and have a little chat with you. I do so enjoy a little quiet conversation with a friend. Don’t you, now?”

To which Mrs. Narrowby, delighted with the confidential tone of her future daughter-in-law, replied that a quiet conversation with a friend was really very delightful, indeed there was nothing she enjoyed so much. Did Miss Rivers find Meadowthorpe a pleasant residence?”

“Oh! yes, it is a sweet pretty place; only flat, you know. You will let me say it is flat, won’t you?” and Noelline held her pretty head rather on one side, as if deprecating what she thought might be Mrs. Narrowby’s displeasure at such a slight cast upon the place. “Just a little flat. But then, we have come from Devon, and Devon is such a charming county, quite the garden of England, you know. But still I like Meadowthorpe very much. My brother and I are quite charmed with the people; they are so truly kind.”

“Oh, Miss Rivers! I am sure you are very

good to say so. But indeed the Meadowthorpe people, though slightly exclusive, and you know we cannot visit with everyone, can we, now?"

Miss Rivers replied that of course they could not visit with everyone, it was not to be expected.

"No. But though exclusive, we are very kind-hearted, and disposed to be friendly. This is a pleasant little gathering, is it not?"

"Yes, pleasant in its way. I must say though, that I prefer dinner engagements to these small tea and turn outs,"—Mrs. Narrowby mentally determined that she would invite the Hall people to salmon and champagne at the earliest opportunity—"You know down at the place in Devon, we had scarcely any but dinner engagements. But Miss Alwyne has got together some very nice people. That Janita Raeburn now, is a charming little thing, so perfectly *naïve* and simple," and Miss Rivers began to play with a cambric handkerchief that Janita had left behind her on the sofa.

"Well, yes," Mrs. Narrowby replied, mildly condescending to the subject. "I don't know that there is anything to find fault with in the girl. No *tone* about her, you perceive that, of course, and very irregularly trained; no method in her

education at all before she came down to Meadow-thorpe, none at all!"

"Perhaps not; still she is fascinating, rather. You know there is often a charm about these unschooled creatures"—Miss Rivers had got to the point now—"and if I am not mistaken"—looking at her companion with a pretty, mischievous smile—"young Mr. Longden is of that opinion."

Mrs. Narrowby came to the rescue at once. Miss Rivers must not remain in possession of that theory a moment longer.

"Oh! my dear Miss Rivers, I assure you there is nothing of the sort, absolutely nothing of the sort. I believe the child has a fancy for Longden, young girls are so foolish, and think so much of any little attention that may be shown them; but as to anything serious, I assure you there could not be a greater mistake."

Again Miss Rivers shook her golden ringlets.

"Ah, well! perhaps his affections are otherwise engaged. Gentlemen of his poetic temperament generally find a guiding star early in life."

Mrs. Narrowby was rather pleased than otherwise with this manifestation of what in anyone else she would have stigmatised as unpardonable

curiosity. Perhaps already the young lady from the Hall might be interested in knowing that Longden's affections were at his own disposal, and so she hastened to assure her of the fact.

"Oh! Miss Rivers, nothing of the sort. Though I say it myself, Longden is very prudent, remarkably so; and you know I think marriage a serious thing, a very serious thing, and I am sure I should wish my son to use the utmost consideration in entering upon it. It is the dearest wish of my heart to see him suitably settled," here Mrs. Narrowby began to look expressive—"but I assure you he is perfectly unentangled at present, unless indeed his affections have been captivated recently—I may say this evening."

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Narrowby, pray do not mention anything of the kind," and Noelline blushed—she could blush whenever she chose—and concealed with her ivory fan what Mrs. Narrowby thought was a smile of maidenly consciousness. Indeed both the smile and the blush were so very conscious that Mrs. Narrowby began to consider in her own mind whether that pretty little Gothic villa on the St. Olave's road, next to Mrs. Canon Crumpets, which had been unlet since Michaelmas, would

not make a charming residence for the young couple, in the course of a few months. Say six months, for long engagements were so very troublesome ; there was nothing she set her face against so much as long engagements.

Mrs. Narrowby would willingly have detained her companion during the rest of the evening, but Noelline had found out all she wanted to know now, and so she made an excuse for slipping away again into the garden. There, to her inward vexation, she found Elene Somers sauntering amongst the azalia beds with Longden Narrowby ; and, more vexatious still, her brother and Janita Raeburn just making their appearance at the end of the long walk, engaged in what appeared to be a very pleasant conversation. It was a long time since his face had worn an expression of such real content as brightened it whilst he strolled along side by side with the little Inverallan girl.

That sort of thing would not do at all. It must not be allowed to go on any longer. Noelline tripped lightly up to him, and taking her brother's arm, said with sweet playfulness—

“ Oh ! Gavin, you runaway, where have you been ? Do you know I have been searching for

you all over? Miss Alwyne wants to show you some of those beautiful etchings of hers. Pray do not keep her waiting any longer, she will be quite out of patience."

And, because a lady's summons, be it real or feigned, can never be trifled with, Gavin Rivers was obliged to leave his bright little companion. Reluctantly enough though, as Noelline could tell by the shade which came over his face, and the short, abrupt answers which he gave to her as they went back into the cottage.

"I am so sorry to interrupt your walk, Janita, darling," said the wily mermaid, as she possessed herself of her brother's arm, "but you know I could not disobey Miss Alwyne, could I?" And as she said this she looked keenly at Janita.

Yes; this time the child was disappointed. That tell-tale countenance could hide nothing. With secret, angry triumph Miss Rivers noticed the sudden fading out of the bright smile as poor Janita turned slowly away and joined the rest of the ladies. Noelline brought her brother into the library, where Miss Alwyne was showing her artist friend some etchings of foreign cathedrals, done by an Italian engraver.

"Ah! dear Miss Alwyne, I hope you have room for one more admirer. I have brought my brother to look at those gems of yours; it will be such a treat to him. *Do* let him see the gateway of Rheims, will you, it is so perfectly beautiful?"

Miss Rivers thought her success was as perfectly beautiful as the gateway of Rheims when she had got Gavin comfortably located between Miss Alwyne and the artist; located for the remainder of the evening too, there could be no uncertainty about that, for Mr. Estay had so much to say about each successive picture, and so much admiration to express, and so many criticisms to make, and so many beauties to point out, that there was very little chance of any of the party quitting the portfolio until supper was announced.

The triumph was complete when, meeting Elene Somers a few minutes afterwards, she beguiled her also into the library, and, with many apologies for displacing Mr. Estay from his comfortable seat, installed the Dean's daughter on the sofa side by side with her brother, so near him that Elene's white cashmere *sortie du bal* almost touched his face as its fair wearer bent

over the portfolio to admire Miss Alwyne's "gems." Miss Somers had a passion for etching, indeed she could do a little in that way herself; and she had been on the continent too, and seen all those dear old places, Rheims, and Milan, and Cologne, and Antwerp, and Nüremberg, and she doted so on foreign architecture, it was quite one of her weaknesses, and it was so kind of dear Miss Rivers to think of bringing her into the library and giving her such an unexpected pleasure. But then dear Miss Rivers was always so thoughtful about everyone. And Elene had a few little things of that kind at the Deanery, scraps that she had picked up abroad, if Miss Rivers and her brother would like to look them over she should be so happy to send them down to the Hall.

To which Noelline answered with her very sweetest of smiles, that she would not think of giving Miss Somers the trouble of sending her foreign collection down to the Hall; but she and Gavin should be so delighted to call at the Deanery some day, her brother had such a taste for that sort of thing. "Have you not, Gavin dear?"

Of course "Gavin dear" could not say no

without appearing rude to Miss Alwyne, who had taken the trouble to send into the garden for him. And so, though he could willingly have sent the Deanery and the etchings, along with Elene herself, to the antipodes, he replied that it would give him great pleasure to avail himself of Miss Somers's polite offer.

After that came the fowls and the light wines ; after them, carriages. By twelve o'clock all was silent in Gentility Square. Miss Alwyne's little evening party was nothing but a memory now.

Half an hour later Noelline Rivers sat in her curtained boudoir, the lamp-light gleaming amongst the folds of her transparent blue dress and glistening upon the silver wheat ears in her hair. And on her knee lay the little black terrier, to whom she spoke her mind after this fashion—

“ And so they want us to marry a Meadowthorpe youth, do they ? A Meadowthorpe youth ; that is very pretty, indeed. But we know better, don't we, Tip ? ”

To which Tip winked sagaciously, and replied, “ I should rather think we do, my lady.”

CHAPTER VII.

ANITA went up into her narrow, half-furnished bedroom at the Aspens that night—or morning rather—feeling wearily happy. For the weariness she could easily account, for the happiness not so easily. And indeed that is the truest happiness upon which we do not reason, which we cannot even explain. And so, as Janita sat in the casement, looking out over the moonlight which flooded the great, level, sea-like Dyke-land plain, she never asked herself why she was so happy. She only lived over and over again in memory that evening, every hour and half-hour of it, until the weariness conquered at last, and, with the moss-wreath still upon her forehead, and her muslin dress making a white gleam in the chamber, she leaned her arms on the window-seat and fell

fast asleep, to live it all once more in dreams.

It was the first party she had ever been to. At Inverallan they kept no company, and at Meadowthorpe she had never been asked anywhere until this evening, at least, not to meet any one. And yet her *débüt* had not been what is generally called a success. Amongst all those words which she recalled with such entire delight, there was not one compliment; not one meaningless, honeyed speech, such as the barrack officers spent their lives in repeating, and the St. Olave's belles theirs in hearing. No one had told her, either by word or look, that she was beautiful, that her eyes shamed the stars, and her forehead the lilies. No one had pressed her hand, or whispered into her ear a word which could bring the blush of gratified vanity to her cheek. Then why was she so happy, and why did that bright smile keep breaking over her lips?

It might be the keen sense of pleasure in the society of minds that could understand and appreciate her own. Being with those people from London, hearing their thoughts and opinions, was like getting into a new life. Quite refreshing it seemed, after having been shut up so long to the

Meadowthorpe young ladies, who always assented to everything she said, and never had any ideas of their own about anything. Indeed, sometimes, out of pure mischief, Janita had said the most contrary things, just to see if she could get them to dispute her words, but it was no use. If she remarked that it was so cold, Miss Narrowby replied, "Yes, very," and if, ten minutes after, Janita said that the day was warm and pleasant, Miss Narrowby replied, "Yes, very," in just the same tones as before. That was the extent of her social intercourse with the Gablehouse young ladies. With these new people it was so different. Conversing with them, her life seemed to unfold. Thought quickened itself upon thought, she felt that she was growing and expanding. Was it the remembrance of words of theirs, then, that made the smile keep rippling up to her lips, as she sat there with her arms on the window-seat, watching the moonlight as it flooded the level fields, and quivered through the old pollard-willow trees, and made such long streaks of alternate sheen and shadow in the quiet little garden of the Aspens?

No. It was pleasant to recall the words of the strangers, their frank, genial ways, so different from

the stilted society of the village aristocrats ; it was refreshing, for once in a while, to have been able to lift the veil and talk out the thought that was in her, to live in the higher part of her nature, as she could do with them—but when Janita smiled that bright, half-unconscious smile, she was thinking of the walk with Gavin Rivers, down the long pathway by the copse, after the London people had left them. And he had been telling her all about that voyage home, how he used to take care of her, and hold her in his arms, and charm her into quietness after old Ilsie had hushed and crooned in vain. Janita thought that he had not quite lost the charm yet, for walking by his side down amongst those hazel-bushes and sweet briar beds, she felt so safe, so taken care of ; as if no harm could happen to her, and no one vex her whilst he was near. And when Noelline, all smiles and playfulness, had fetched him away, she felt as if a great light had gone out suddenly ; all was so cold and grey, and it seemed such a weariness to have to go back and make talk with Miss Narrowby, and listen to Longden's elegant little speeches again.

After that, Janita thought about the last letter

she had had from Agnes Home, in which Agnes had told her how nicely Willie was getting on in his London situation, and how they were all thinking so much about having her back again with them at the end of August. Oh! how happy they should be, and what fine walks and talks they should have; what rambles down the glen, and up the hill-side, and over the moors. For she was so lonely now that Belle and Maggie were married, and Willie away. But Willie was coming home in August, too; he *must* be at Inverallan when Nyta came.

How they loved her! How tenderly they thought of her, still remembering her for what she was twelve months ago. Then Janita asked herself how she would like to go back again and live at the Manse, with merry, laughing Agnes and good-tempered Willie. And she felt almost, nay quite vexed, with herself that her heart did not bound at the thought of it, that instead of bounding at the thought of it, she drew back, and rather rested on the memory of the evening that had just passed, than on the hope of joy to come in that far-away Manse home. Ah! Janita could no more go back to the old Inverallan life, and fit

herself again into its simple pleasures, be content with its moorland rambles, its idle, thoughtless, holiday pastime, than she could wear the little frocks and pinafores, relics of long-ago childish days, that Ilsie hoarded up with such reverent care amongst lavender and rue, in her best chest of drawers.

And yet it would have been better for her, happier, at least, if she could have gone back again, and nestled down once more amongst her foster sisters, and married Willie Home, and staid quietly all her life in some bonnie little Highland Manse, away from that great world where so many toil, and strive, and suffer, and are disappointed.

But there is no retracing of our steps in life. That journey is all forward. Its bitter herbs or sweet flowers, once gathered, can be gathered again no more. And though all around and behind us lie the pleasant fields, the mountain-girded valleys, where we could love to linger; and though far away before us stretches the desert, whose burning sands neither palm shadow nor water spring cools, still we must go forward, always forward; made strong by one great thought, that whatever the way

may be, there waits for us at the end, rest for ever.

But forgetfulness came to Janita before such thoughts as these, and leaning her head on her arms she went to sleep there in the narrow little room, sitting by the window. The church clock struck two before she awoke. The moon was shining brightly still, and by its light she went to bed, thanking God first who had made her life so pleasant and so beautiful.

Miss Alwyne's party was nearly the last. Only Mrs. Narrowby's champagne dinner and a few minor entertainments from some of the Dykeland people, followed it. Then Gentility Square began to wonder what manner of return the Hall family would make to the brilliant and varied hospitalities which had been extended to them.

They were not kept in suspense very long. Early in June a snowfall of crested envelopes fluttered into the Square, containing invitations for a dinner-party on the twenty-fifth; and on the following day a second shower summoned the younger members to a ball on the thirtieth.

Great then was the rushing to and fro between the Meadowthorpe aristocrats, and the milliners and

dressmakers who worked for them; quite out of all count the journeys to St. Olave's in quest of fashion books and new brocades, wreaths, lappets, streamers, and other varieties of feminine head-gear. Miss Rivers, who got all her things sent down from London at the commencement of each season, who had but to say to her maid, "Lycet, my blue dress with the silver ornaments," or "Lycet, the pink tulle this evening," or "my pearl-coloured silk, Lycet, and the jet coronet,"—and forthwith the costume was spread out in her dressing-room—Miss Rivers smiled to herself at the preparations which were going on in the village. And when in her morning walks she had encountered mysterious parcels drifting from back door to back door of the upper-class houses, silver-paper bags, out of which little tufts of marabout feathers protruded, large flat boxes, in which nothing but lace dresses could be wrapped up, and huge amorphous-looking bundles, carried under the shawls of dressmakers' apprentices, she would go home and have a merry laugh with Tip, who understood quite as well as his mistress the commotion which the Hall party was causing in the village.

At last the eventful day arrived. The rank and

fashion of Gentility Square, together with a few of the Close people from St. Olave's, and one or two barrack officers, were assembled in the fine old dining-room, around such an array of family plate and crested glass and hereditary china, as made the eldest Miss Vere Aubrey's heart throb with enthusiasm. Colonel Gore was there too. He had come down from town at Noelline's request, to look round the new place, and pick a little amusement out of the Meadowthorpe tribe. And he did pick a little amusement out of them, though, of course, he was too well-bred to let them see what he was doing.

The affair passed off very successfully. Miss Rivers was all smiles and amiability, as one of the "Meadowthorpe tribe" could not forbear saying to her neighbour at the dinner table; so anxious to make herself agreeable to everyone, so exceedingly winning and courteous. And Mrs. Rivers, though silent and reserved, was quite the lady; and Gavin Rivers, if rather grave, had provided the best of wines, so that he could not be found fault with. Indeed his gravity, and his mother's reserve, only made Noelline's sweet vivacity more marked.

Mrs. Macturk, in a new blue satin, and feather

to match, said it was decidedly the best dinner party she had been to since that grand banquet given to the present Duke when he came of age ten years ago. But, oh, dear! if she had been Mrs. Rivers, she should have felt so nervous about the china.

“You know if anything *should* happen to one of those beautiful plates, and spoil the set, it would be such a pity, would it not, Miss Aubrey?”

To which Miss Vere Aubrey, who had a slight feeling against Mrs. Macturk, because that lady always dispensed with the “Vere” in speaking to her Aubrey House neighbours, replied that the aristocracy—with a very strong emphasis on the word—never allowed themselves to be discomposed by such trifles as the breaking of a plate; it was only new families who were so very solicitous about their crockery. *Her* mamma had once seen the butler break a china punch-bowl, worth fifty guineas, without moving a muscle; but up-starts went into hysterics if a footman happened to crack a sixpenny saucer.

Mrs. Macturk thought that remark was personal. *She* had gone into hysterics not a month ago, when her parlour-maid threw down one of the late Mr.

Macturk's little Indian tea-cups, and doubtless Miss Aubrey had heard of the occurrence. It was so like Miss Aubrey to be always mentioning those little things. And then Mrs. Macturk decided in her own mind that she would not ask those stuck-up people from Aubrey House to her next state dinner party, which she was sure would be a great privation, because if the Aubrey set did eat off family china a hundred years old, and have crests on their spoons, yet her wine was very superior to anything that ever found its way into the Aubrey cellars, and her soup was the real thing, not bone stew, seasoned with a silver ladle that had a pedigree as long as Miss Matilda's own. In fact, Mrs. Macturk was working herself up into quite an inward state of perturbation, and she would most likely have been betrayed into some outward and visible sign of it ; but, fortunately, before her indignation reached boiling point, Mrs. Rivers gave the signal for the ladies to retire, and the touchy widow's attention was required for her shawl which had become entangled in the buttons of Dr. Maguire's coat.

Once launched into the drawing-room, she got into safe waters again, and was soon sailing away

in conversation with Mrs. Maguire, who did not profess to have a pedigree, or even to know who her great-grandfather was, and who did not shrink from confessing that china *was* a very risky thing, and that she sometimes felt dreadfully nervous when the hired waiters from St. Olave's knocked it about so at her dinner parties. So Mrs. Mac-turk was comforted.

By and by the gentlemen joined them, and then the tide of talk flowed on more briskly than before. Mrs. Narrowby, in a six guinea steel grey moire antique, was turning over a volume of prints as she lounged on the great amber satin woolsack in the middle of the room. Mrs. Mabury and the resident Canon's lady from St. Olave's were chatting on the other side of it, chatting, too, in such clear, distinct tones that the mistress of Gablehouse could hear every word they said.

"Pray," inquired the Canon's lady, "can you tell me who is that distinguished-looking gentleman with a moustache, the one, I mean, who is talking to Miss Rivers? I could not catch his name when he was introduced."

Mrs. Narrowby turned and saw the "distinguished-looking gentleman" bending over Noelline

Rivers in that easy, unembarrassed fashion which proclaimed him to be a friend of the family. Certainly he was very handsome, and very distinguished looking, but not more so than her son Longden, Mrs. Narrowby thought.

“Dear me!” replied Mrs. Mabury, “is it possible you have not heard that little bit of gossip? The gentleman’s name is Gore, Colonel Gore, and he is engaged to Miss Rivers. Not a bad match either for the lady; very good family, so I hear, father a baronet, or something of that sort, and large property in the Cornish mines. Only a younger son you know, but still——”

Mrs. Narrowby felt a thrill of disappointment run down to the very ends of her white gloves. And after the young lady had smiled and blushed as she did, but really some women appeared to have no sense of what is due to the female character. Mrs. Narrowby was very glad her girls did not conduct themselves in such a way. Maria and Julia and Selina never blushed except when it was correct to do so. Meanwhile, Mrs. Mabury continued in that slow, deliberate voice of hers—

“But then, you know, my dear Mrs. St. John,

a young lady of Miss Rivers' appearance and manners might reasonably expect to make a very superior match. She is so exceedingly graceful and attractive. Indeed I am only surprised she has maintained her maiden name so long."

"How very interesting!" said Mrs. St. John, looking through her jewelled eye-glass at the handsome young couple. "And how strange to think that I should never have heard of it. And pray when is the wedding to take place? A wedding from the Hall too, dear me! what a pretty sight it will be. This year, do you suppose?"

"Well, between ourselves, I believe the event will take place before long, perhaps Autumn. Miss Somers fancies it will be Autumn, and you know she is very intimate at the Hall. But it is not talked about publicly yet, and I should not have mentioned it to you, except in the strictest confidence, because these things do sometimes blow over and then it is so exceedingly unpleasant. You remember that unfortunate affair of poor Mr. Sinclair's, two or three years ago; quite the talk of the neighbourhood, you know."

And then Mrs. Mabury branched off into Mr. Sinclair's pre-matrimonial difficulties, and before

she had time to come back again to the Hall wedding, Mrs. St. John was carried away by Mr. Rivers to join in a game at bagatelle in the small drawing-room.

Mrs. Narrowby felt very grieved. That villa on the St. Olave's road would have been so convenient, so perfectly tasteful and genteel, and she had seen a set of curtains only the day before at an upholstery establishment in the High Street, which were just the thing for a small Gothic-windowed dining-room. It was annoying, very. Still, the report might be *only* a report. Meadowthorpe was such a place for gossip, especially wedding gossip, everyone allowed that. And as at the Cottage party Miss Rivers had questioned Mrs. Narrowby about young Mr. Longden's prospects, Mrs. Narrowby thought she might as well return the compliment by putting the new steward's sister through a similar catechetical process relative to her own personal affairs. Accordingly she watched her opportunity, and secured the golden-haired beauty as she was gliding past to join the bagatelle party.

“ You must find the Hall a charming residence,” she began, glancing down the long richly-furnished

suite of rooms which opened out at one end into a conservatory, lighted up now by coloured lamps, whose soft tints gleamed through tresses of passion-flower that wreathed the slight iron columns. “A charming residence, so very complete, and such improvements, too.”

“Yes,” replied the beauty, carelessly, “a pretty place, though the prospects are not extensive. But then, you know, we had got accustomed to Devon, and Devon is so very lovely. Oh ! I often say I would give almost anything to be back again in Devon.”

“No, indeed, would you really ? How strange ! And Longden was only saying the other day that he thought of looking after a practice in Exeter. All the professions in St. Olave’s are so over-crowded, it is almost impossible for a young man to make himself a good position anywhere about here.”

“Oh !” and Noelline smiled again behind her ivory fan ; but though Mrs. Narrowby looked very closely, she could detect no signs of a blush this time. “Yes, Devon is a sweet place. Still I like the Hall very much ; it is small, rather, and confined, after our place at Violetdale, but I can put

up with any little drawbacks for the present. It is not permanent, you know."

And Miss Rivers looked across to Colonel Gore, who was watching her from his seat beside the Dean's lady. She intended Mrs. Narrowby to see that look, and also the brilliant sparkle of her diamond ring, which she had moved so that the light from the chandelier fell directly upon it.

Mrs. Narrowby did see them both, and understood what they meant. Whereupon her castle came down with a crash. She must tell Longden at once, and caution him against committing himself any farther in that direction. She did so that very evening as soon as she returned home.

"And now, my dear boy," she said, when the caution had been administered, "I give my entire sanction to any attentions which you may bestow upon Miss Raeburn, and be assured I shall rejoice if they produce the desired effect."

Longden was a very good lad to his mother, and always did what she told him. He had suspended his attentions to Janita at her request, and at her request, too, he was ready to resume them. The next afternoon he went across to the Aspens with a message from his sister, who would be so

much obliged if Miss Raeburn could go over and help her to arrange some sea-weeds which had been sent from Whitecliffe for the Meadowthorpe bazaar. She did not know anyone else whose taste she could depend upon, and if dear Miss Raeburn would not think it too much trouble, &c. Janita went, and spent the whole evening in spreading out the delicate fronds upon card-board, and afterwards arranging them in groups and wreaths, and other fanciful devices, whilst Longden hung about with scissors, and gum-bottles, and pretty speeches. And when evening was over, and the work still remained incomplete, Selina said it would be *such* a relief to her mind if dear Miss Raeburn would finish it for her at home; she really had no notion of doing anything of that sort, and she knew Miss Raeburn had such perfect taste. Of course Janita was very glad to help forward the cause in a pleasanter way than by stitching wristbands for it. She did take the sea-weeds home with her, and next day Selina sent her brother across with some card-board that she had forgotten, and next day with some more shells, and the next with more sea-weed, and the next with something else. So that Longden contrived to get

at least half a dozen visits to the Aspens out of that little business ; which visits being made in the sunny month of June, when there is no evening twilight worth speaking of, were not likely entirely to escape the notice of Gentry Square.

And that was how the first Hall dinner-party ended.

The ball next week, if not so solid, was more brilliant. There was not so much rustling of brocades, and sparkling of family diamonds, but there was great fluttering of lace and muslin round snowy shoulders, and tremor of rosebud wreaths on locks of all shades, from the flaxen curls of Elene Somers, to the raven bandeaux of Emily Graham, Mrs. Mabury's sister, a beautiful brunette, just out. There was dancing and music, and charades, and then supper, with its motto crackers, and bon-bons, and walnut kisses ; and then more music, and more dancing,—Mrs. Rivers sitting all the time in her own room, reading the "Legends of the Saints." Gavin led Elene in to supper. Noelline told him he must do so, as Miss Somers represented the church interest, and it was proper that precedence should be given to it. And she made him act in a charade with the Dean's

daughter, too, and very frequently stand up in the same dance with her, besides bringing her volumes of engravings to look at, and taking her into the conservatory to show her the new roses from Covent Garden. So when Elene got back to the Deanery, she told her mamma that it had been a most delightful evening; she had never enjoyed an evening so much for a long time. Miss Rivers was so charming and agreeable, and her brother so very polite, indeed it was quite a mistake to say that the new steward of Meadowthorpe was silent and reserved, he was nothing of the sort, only a little quiet now and then.

Janita was not there.

“Gavin, my dear,” Noelline had said when, as she was writing out the list of invitations, her brother expressed his wish that Miss Raeburn should be included, “Gavin, my dear, I should be exceedingly happy to send a note to the Aspens, but I know it would not be of the slightest use. The child is not out yet.”

“But she was at Miss Alwyne’s.”

“Oh! yes, but that was a different affair altogether, just one or two people to tea in a friendly way. Besides, Miss Alwyne has a fancy

for her, and merely asked her for the sake of giving the little thing a treat."

"Might she not come here for the same purpose?"

"My dear Gavin," and Noelline counted up her guests on her jewelled fingers, "you really do not know what you are talking about; excuse me, but you do not, indeed. It is not the custom in society to invite mere children to full-dress parties. And, besides, you would only put the girl to needless suffering by bringing her amongst a set of strangers; she would not know what to do with herself, and I should not know what to do with her. Her manners are completely unformed, countrified in the extreme."

"I think her manners are very pretty, much more so than those of many young ladies to whom you have done me the honour of introducing me since we came here."

"Oh! yes, yes. I don't mean to say a word against the child, she is a charming little creature, very charming; but, Gavin, we must not have her on the thirtieth. Leave it to me. I will send for her quietly some day when we are alone, she will enjoy it very much more."

But Noelline had no intention of doing anything of the sort.

“As you please, then, this time,” said Gavin, going out of the room. “Only, remember, she *is* to be asked before long.”

“Is she, though?” said the golden haired beauty to Tip, who was lying on the hearth-rug.

Tip got up in a bustle, shook himself, turned his head on one side, winked and curled round again to sleep.

“Certainly not, my lady.”

CHAPTER VIII.



T was the night after the Hall party. Noelline Rivers and her brother were sitting in the dining-room, having what they very seldom had, a quiet *tête-à-tête*.

Mrs. Rivers was not with them; she scarcely ever sat with her children, or conversed with them, except when it was absolutely necessary. Her time was mostly spent in a little room opening out of her own dressing-room, which she had had fitted up as a sort of oratory. It was a narrow, lofty room, panelled with dark oak, and lighted by a small lattice casement. At one end was a recess, draped with heavy curtains. In it hung a crucifix of fine ivory-work, and before that a desk and cushion. Beside the window was a table, covered with books, chiefly Confessions and Meditations,

with a few "Lives of the Saints." The walls were hung with portraits of the early Christian Fathers ; Bernard, Augustine, Polycarp, Chrysostom, and many others, whose hushed, rapt countenances seemed to bid away all human feeling or passion, and invite the soul to those heights of holy contemplation which they themselves had reached. To-night, however, we have not to do with Mrs. Rivers, but only with "the children" as she calls them, and they are down-stairs in the great dining-room.

Almost in the dark. An elegant lamp, whose globe is supported by the three Graces, carved in Parian marble, stands on the table ; but its light is turned down to a tiny flame, only bright enough to outline the rich furniture of the room, and to glimmer faintly on the massive salvers and curious old carved goblets that are ranged in order upon the oaken sideboard. Outside, the moonlight is streaming down upon the great laurel trees in the Hall garden, making their glossy leaves shine as if set with diamonds. And it streams, too, upon the brazen gnomon of the old stone sun-dial that stands in the middle of the lawn, the great old dial put there in Elizabeth's time, over whose cabalistic

figures many a puritan dame and courtly royalist lady has bent in the days that are no more.

Passing through the oriel window, from which the crimson curtains are drawn back, that moonlight falls upon the face of Noelline Rivers as she sits by her embroidery frame. What a sweet, saint-like, meekly bended face it is, such as painters delight to copy, and lovers to cherish in their hearts ; so pure, so maidenly, so gentle ! Just so she looked eight years ago, when by a few dainty little falsehoods and misrepresentations, portionless Laura May, her brother's first love, had been "disposed of." Just so she looked when poor Laura's funeral card, bearing the pitiful inscription, "aged twenty-one," was brought into the drawing-room at Violetdale. Just so she looked when Francis Gore saw her for the first time, and vowed she should be his bride, the sweetest that was ever won.

Noelline sits at her embroidery frame, but she is not putting the finishing touches to that beautiful damask rose ; even if there were light enough to match the shades, Noelline is in no mood for work to-night. Instead, she is gathering up her skeins of silk from the frame and letting them fall, ga-

thering them and letting them fall, over and over again, as if in a sort of reverie; whilst the moonlight creeps into her golden hair and makes a halo round her bended head.

Did you ever keep an aquarium? And if so, did you ever watch the motion of a barnacle that had attached itself to the rough outside surface of an oyster shell? Did you ever watch the regular opening and shutting of that little hairy hand with its delicate curved fingers, closing sometimes over a poor insect that had ventured too near, sometimes over a tiny shrimp whose playful gambols it stopped for ever; but prey or no prey, always opening and shutting with slow, monotonous, automaton like motion? And, though it may be sacrilegious in the extreme to compare a beautiful woman's hand to a barnacle, yet looking at those slender fingers over which the moonlight, as it strays, gets entangled in many a gem of diamond, pearl, or turquoise, something in their slow, steady, relentless grasp reminds you of the fishy thing. Why, you cannot tell; but so it is.

Gavin sits away from his sister on the other side of the room. His face is in deep shadow, so deep that you cannot distinguish any expression it may

wear. He may be thinking of poor Laura, for it is seven years to-night since she died ; or he may have buried her memory reverently and turned him to the sunshine again. All you know of him now is, that he sits there in the great easy chair, his hands gripping each other over his chest, only parting now and then that one of them may stroke the head of a great Newfoundland dog that crouches at his feet with its muzzle on his knee. And the creature gazes at him out of brown, wistful eyes with a look of trust such as Noelline can never win from it.

Colonel Gore left them late in the afternoon. Scarce three hours ago, his kiss was on her lips, and her dainty hand lay within his strong grasp. Most likely, then, she is thinking about him now. Most likely, as she sits there in the moonlight with bended head and sweet pale face, she is dreaming over his kiss again, and picturing the bearded face with its dark eyes that have looked so tenderly in her own. No; Miss Rivers is doing nothing of the sort. She never dreams—at least, not such dreams as those. Francis may lean back in the first-class carriage and muse on his lady-love ; his lady-love has quite other work to do than muse on him.

"Well," said Noelline at last, and that barnacle-like hand stayed its motion. "I believe we have paid most of our debts now."

The debts alluded to were those of hospitality. The Rivers' were a moneyed family, and had never been seriously affected by any others. Gavin understood her, for he replied carelessly—

"Yes. I suppose we have nearly worked our way through for the present. Last night made a considerable clearance."

"There is only a little dinner company left now, to be got rid of. We must have Colonel Banks, and Mrs. Crumpet, and the rest of the Close people some day before long, and then I believe the list is quite cleared off. I have the names of the Close people on my tablets, but it is too dark to read them. There is no one else."

"Except the Professor; you have not mentioned him."

"Oh! but he has never asked you to dine. There is no need to have him."

"No need, except that I wish him to be asked."

"A superannuated old recluse. What are you thinking about, Gavin? What possible advan-

tage do you expect to reap from an acquaintance with him?"

Gavin ignored this last little bit of selfishness.

"He may be a recluse, Noelline; but he is not superannuated. On many subjects he is very intelligent and well-informed."

"On what subjects, pray? Fossils and mathematics?"

"He is well-informed on many subjects upon which I have a pleasure in conversing with him. Also, he was a friend of our father's. Also, I wish that he should be asked."

"Well, Gavin, since you wish to block up the house with such very distinguished society, it is not my place to remonstrate. Will you tell me who you wish invited to meet the said Professor?"

"Only Canon Hewlet from St. Olave's. And, Noelline, Miss Ruthven and her niece are to be asked to tea the same evening."

"Really, Gavin, you astonish me. Perhaps you would wish a note to be sent to the head cook at the Bishop's palace also. I believe, in point of refinement and cultivation, she is about on a level with the Professor's sister. And as for this Janita

Raeburn, if you choose to fancy her because twenty years ago you happened to have her in your arms a few times, you must not expect me to share in the feeling. I warn you that I cannot do anything of the sort."

All this was said in that low, sweet tone from which Noelline's voice never changed. Grave or gay, angry or amiable, her words always rippled on with a silvery sound like shallow waters over the pebbly bed of some mountain stream.

"All that I wish from you, Noelline, is to let the notes be sent to-morrow. I shall write to Canon Hewlet and the Professor myself, inviting them to an early dinner next Thursday. You will attend to it, that Miss Ruthven and her niece are asked to come in to tea the same evening."

"Gavin, excuse me, but it is perfectly ridiculous."

"Noelline."

Something in her brother's voice told the young lady that she had gone as far as it would be prudent to go. Her plans would be best forwarded now by silent acquiescence.

"I beg your pardon. I was thinking about—

but never mind. I will see that the notes are sent to-morrow."

"Thank you."

And then Mr. Rivers went out of the room, followed by the great Newfoundland dog. A minute or two afterwards Noelline saw them walking together in the moonlight up and down the long walk.

She got up and drew the curtains, not so gently as might have been expected from a young lady of her sweet appearance. Then she opened her little tortoise-shell writing-desk and turned the lamp up to a bright flame which sparkled merrily enough on the silver goblets and the richly-carved frames of the family portraits. These were the sentences which grew very slowly into shape on the crested note-paper under Noelline's taper fingers :

"DEAR MISS RUTHVEN,—We know that you do not enjoy mixed society, but we very much wish you to spend a quiet evening with us this week. Come on Thursday, will you?—the day the Professor dines with my brother; and pray bring your niece with you. I assure you we already

feel quite a romantic interest in the charming little girl. With our united kind regards, yours most sincerely, **NOELLINE RIVERS.**"

A very simple note; yet the wording of it had cost Miss Rivers nearly half an hour of thought. When it was finished she put it into an envelope and tossed it contemptuously on the table. After that she sat for another half hour with her cheek pressed against the onyx seal of her pen, the onyx seal which had the Rivers' motto, "True and firm," graven upon it.

In the bright lamplight, that bended face did not look so lovely as when an hour ago it charmed the moonbeams into lingering over it. You might almost read the thoughts which crept into feelings upon the changeful features. Now that Noelline was alone, she did not need to retain that winning smile, which, like sunrise over the Dykeland fens, bathed in many-tinted beauty the mischievous vapours beneath. Sometimes her face wore a very perplexed look, sometimes it settled into an expression almost of malice, sometimes of defiance. At last all these cleared away. She reached her desk once more and wrote a second little note. No need for pause or

consideration this time ; the steward's sister knew what she was doing.

“ DEAR MISS NARROWBY,—Come and spend a quiet evening with us next Thursday, and bring Mr. Longden with you if he is disengaged, as we are expecting Miss Ruthven. Beg him to excuse the informality of this invitation ; my brother would have written, but you know how numerous his duties are at this season of the year, and therefore he generally makes me his amanuensis when possible. Be assured I have never performed the office with more pleasure than now. Come early. It will be quite a family party. Yours most sincerely, N. RIVERS.”

“ I don't want the girl,” Noelline murmured to herself, as she put this second note into a dainty little envelope, which, like everything else in that tortoise-shell writing-desk, bore the motto, “ True and firm.”—“ I do not want the girl particularly ; but I suppose it would not suit Meadowthorpe propriety to ask her brother by himself. It is all right now.”

She sat down in the easy chair which Gavin had

left, and laying her golden curls against its velvet cushion, mused for a long time, until the lamplight had dwindled to a faint blue flame again, sufficient only as before to outline the rich furniture of the room. The little clock on the mantel-piece struck eleven. When it had finished, Noelline got up and put her desk away, saying as she did so—

“Yes, that is quite settled. My brother shall never marry Janita Raeburn.”

CHAPTER IX.



HE notes were despatched according to promise. Next day an answer came from the Professor. He had begun it "Gentlemen," as if addressing a class-room full of students. Then the word had been crossed out and "Dear Sir," put in its place. The Professor would be very happy to dine at the Hall on Thursday. Also there came a note from Miss Hepzibah. She was very sorry that in consequence of domestic engagements—it was the season for making rhubarb-wine—she should not be able to wait upon Miss Rivers; but her niece would be exceedingly happy to come and take tea on the evening named.

Noelline was in her boudoir, embroidering a smoking cap for Colonel Gore when Miss Ruthven's note was brought up. She read it and threw it

carelessly on the floor, where it was pounced upon by Tip, who got a famous game of romps out of it.

“Tiresome little thing!” said Noelline to herself, in that undertone which she often used, “I suppose if she once gets her foot in here we shall never see the last of her. There is no telling what it may lead to. And that dusty old Professor, too. It is really unaccountable the fancy Gavin has taken to him. It shall be put a stop to, though.”

Tip thought she was talking to him, and so came up, winking and holding his head on one side to hear what her ladyship had got to say. But his mistress was in a bad temper just then, and instead of caressing him as usual, she gave her ugly little familiar a knock on the head, which sent him whining to the farthest corner of the room. Tip, like other sycophants, had to take bitter or sweet as it happened to come. Miss Rivers had very beautiful manners, generally. In company she was charming, “so sweetly graceful, you know, and fascinating; oh! so very fascinating,” as Gentility Square said.

But if Tip had been as communicative as some other people, he might have told several little tales

about Miss Noelline's demeanour during their private conferences, which would have made Gentility Square hold up its hands in astonishment. Tip, however, knew better than to do anything so mean as that ; for though ugly, he was a person of steady principles, like Miss Hepzibah's plain cook, and had studied that part of the catechism which relates to evil speaking.

Before he had finished rubbing his unfortunate nose, there was a second knock at the door, and Lycet appeared with a silver waiter, bearing a note from Gablehouse. Longden would be quite at Miss Rivers's service on Thursday ; but Miss Narrowby regretted exceedingly that she had agreed to take tea with a friend in St. Olave's that evening. She would have given anything to get off the engagement, for she should so much prefer a quiet evening at the Hall ; but she was afraid it could not be managed. She was so sorry, so very sorry.

So she might. Miss Rivers was not, though. Nothing could be more favourable to the plan which she had formed the evening before. A wily smile curled her lips as she opened her desk a third time and wrote a note to Elene Somers, asking her to

take Miss Narrowby's place, and spend a "quiet evening" at the Hall. This note she despatched to Miss Somers, who was spending a fortnight at Meadowthorpe Rectory, with orders for the bearer to bring back an answer.

The answer was all that could be desired. Elene would be charmed to come and spend the evening with dear Noelline—the ladies had already begun to call each other by their Christian names—it would be *such* a treat, and she would come very early and bring her work, and they should have such a delightful time together. It was so kind of dear Miss Rivers to ask her, for there was nothing she enjoyed half so much as a quiet evening at the Hall.

Which reply pleased Noelline so much that she caught Tip in her arms and pressed his little black nose against her cheek.

"And now, we shall see what we shall see, shan't we, Tip?"

And Tip, delighted to be received into favour again, winked vigorously and shook himself all over and replied as briskly as possible—

"I think we shall, my lady."

All was clear now. Noelline could see quite to

the end of her plans. It was rather a complicated game, though, which she had to play, one requiring some tact and forethought. Several things had to be accomplished. But the steward's lovely sister had thought over her advantages, and calculated her chances and arranged her moves beforehand. Care and patience, and she should give checkmate before long.

In the first place, her brother must be prevented from having any more quiet opportunities with Janita Raeburn, like that which she had been fortunate enough to interrupt at Miss Alwyne's. Next, the girl must be prevented from falling in love with Gavin—well, she might fall in love with him, if she chose, that was of no consequence—but she must, at all hazards, be prevented from entangling him into an engagement. And in order to do this, Noelline must contrive, somehow or other, to make her brother believe that Janita was the destined bride of Longden Narrowby. If, by any little chance hints or insinuations, she could get Gavin deluded into this conviction, all was safe. For she knew that he was the very soul of honour, and rather than infringe upon what he conceived to be the rights of another, he would

sacrifice his own. She had proved that already in the case of Laura May ; doubtless she could prove it again in the case of Janita Raeburn. And if the end should be alike in both cases—who could say that it was any fault of hers ; if people *would* be so infatuated, why, let them.

Lastly, she must bring about a marriage between Gavin and Elene Somers. This done, her success would be complete.

It was a risky game, rather, but Noelline did not despair of winning. She knew the characters with which she had to deal, the material out of which she had to weave her design. Gavin ; bold, energetic, decided, quick to act upon any purpose which he took up, very quick if the purpose was taken up in the heat of passion. Janita ; shy, sensitive, easily wounded, catching at a word, chilled by a look. Longden Narrowby ; gentle, impressible, shallow. Elene ; anxious for a settlement, amiable, and easy to be entreated. Only the first of these would give her any trouble.

Gavin Rivers was a man whom it was impossible, by any power of mind or will, to drive ; difficult even to be led, so long as the leading-strings were in sight. But a word dropped as if by acci-

dent, a hint cautiously administered, a whisper breathed at the right moment, would do what neither leading nor driving could ever accomplish. She could rouse his suspicions. She could set him on a wrong track. Without telling a barefaced falsehood, she could give such a colouring to unmistakable facts, as would make him believe all that she wished him to believe.

With the quick penetration of an artful nature, she had detected her brother's preference for Janita, a preference of which he himself was, as yet, only half conscious. She would let it alone for a little while, until it had gained strength, until it had grown into love, until it had brought him more under its control. If she interfered now, the preference was so slight that disappointment would not seriously vex him, he would slide back into his old loveless life again easily, without pain. By and by it would take possession of him, it would rule him ; then she would tell her false story, she would make him believe that his love was hopeless. Nay, more, she would make him believe that he had been the sport of a girl's flirtation, that Janita had amused herself by winning his love only to throw it back again. Afterwards, she

knew that in the desperation of wounded pride, he would take up any new fancy that was laid in his way. And to provide for this, she intended, just at the right time, to invite Elene Somers to the Hall for a few weeks, trusting to her grace and beauty and amiability, to lure Gavin into an engagement.

That was the outline of Noelline's plan. No wonder that, as she worked it all out in her own mind, those beautiful eyebrows knotted themselves into a rugged, uneven ridge, and the red lips were held together so tightly, only bending now and then into a smile of triumph as some improved mode of action suggested itself to her, some fresh scheme by which she could more securely compass her ends.

And whilst all this plotting was going on in the silken-curtained boudoir, Mrs. Rivers sat apart in her draped recess before the ivory crucifix, perusing the wonderful life and spiritual exercises of Saint Theresa. And a holy fervour inspired her as she read how that favoured devotee was drawn up to the roof of her cell in a fit of pious rapture; how she saw visions of her heavenly bridegroom in the clouds, or pictured upon the midnight dark-

ness ; how, after suffering unheard-of pains, she found his name written in letters of fire upon her breast, and upon her left hand a flaming ring, which signified her spiritual marriage. How, also, her temptations took a tangible form, and instead of being vexed, like the other nuns, with wandering thoughts, thousands of imps swarmed round her in the solitude of her cell, leering hellishly upon her, until dispersed by the cross, which she tore from her girdle and flung amongst them. And how, at last, when the time of her death drew near, a strange unearthly light shone out from her body, and the convent rang with celestial music, which never ceased until her corpse was buried under the high altar of the abbey church.

Musing upon a life so exalted as this, the mistress of Meadowthorpe Hall knew nothing of that other life, quite common-place and material, which was daily working on around her. Engirt with rapturous thoughts and meditative delights, she lived above the world. Its little joys and griefs had no existence for her ; neither had its carking cares, its vexing anxieties. In that upper region where she dwelt, no storms ruffled the air ; mists and rains and clouds, lay alike beneath her feet.

And for Gavin Rivers. The clouds and mists were not beneath his feet at all. Instead, they lay in his path, straight before him, and not far away. But the sun was shining through them now, and everyone knows how beautiful even clouds and vapours may appear when the sun is shining through them; how bright their rainbow tints before the wind springs up and they descend in drenching showers.

Gavin Rivers was a much more cheerful man now than when he came to Meadowthorpe four months ago. As he rode about day after day over the Dykeland lordship, planning alterations and improvements, overlooking repairs, giving orders for the pulling down of some mouldering old stack of farm buildings, the clearing out of a choked-up dyke, or the planting of young wood where before only flags and reed grass had cumbered the ground, you would scarcely have known him for the same severe, almost harsh-looking man who sat so wearily and listlessly through his first sermon in Meadowthorpe church. But work is such a fine thing for a man. There is nothing like having prejudices to battle against, and other minds to control, and other wills to govern.

Work braces up a man so ; it gives him a good broad standing place in the world. Successful, it brings fame, and favour, and popularity ; unsuccessful, it develops new energies and lifts the whole character to a higher level. So said Dr. Maguire, and so said Mr. Andrews, the clerk of the works, and so said many more who could not help noticing the great change which had passed over the new steward.

You may say differently if you choose. You may decide for yourself whether Gavin Rivers, as he traverses the level sea-like reach of country over which the Duke of Dykeland holds sway, goes back in thought to the real sea, the deep blue Pacific ; to the becalmed vessel with sails flapping idly in the breeze that will not move her a league on her way ; to that desolate woman who asks neither comfort nor sympathy in her woe ; to the ocean burial, the thin narrow coffin sliding down so quietly to that grave over which no mourner comes to weep ; to the little orphan child whose first lullaby was the wail of winds and waves, whose first cradle his own arms. You may decide for yourself whether, as he rides down Meadowthorpe lane to the clay fields beyond Dykeland

mere, his thoughts cross over into Miss Alwyne's garden on the other side the bank, to the winding walk closed in by hazelbush and sweetbriar, where he and that little ocean nursling—a woman now—talked together of all these things.

Or perhaps, leaving the past, he looks away to the future, to the bright rain clouds upon which the sun is shining now. And he sees beyond them not rain nor storm, but a light far above sunshine, the light of love, and home, and rest, even for him.

It may be so. We cannot tell. The new steward of Meadowthorpe is a man who never thinks aloud, who is not given even to speaking more than is absolutely needful of the feelings that live, and move, and have their being within. He does not trouble the world much with his joys or sorrows. Trying to do his duty honestly, as in God's sight, he thinks that is enough. Men may take count of his words and actions if they will. The life that underlies these is his own.

Only this, I know; that Miss Hepzibah Ruthven, seeing him go down the lane one morning as she stood at old Ben Royley's door, lifted up her two hands and said—

“Blessings on us! How the man is improved.”

CHAPTER X.



HE Duke's yard soon assumed a different aspect under the management of Gavin Rivers. There was no more loitering about in the middle of the morning, no more clustering in little groups a quarter of an hour before the twelve o'clock bell rang, no more free-and-easy gossip over work which might or might not be done, just as the men chose. Destiny Smith had not been very far wrong when he said that afternoon at the bridge-foot—

“Yon man 'll mak a settlement, he will, in this here place.”

Great was the smothered wrath and indignation of the loose hands, when, about three weeks after Mr. Rivers's arrival, the new regulations which had been drawn out by the steward, and sent to London

for the Duke's approval, came into effect, and every man had a certain amount of work given out to him, which was to be accomplished within a given time. To Larry Stead and young Royland and a few others who had always been in the habit of doing "a fair day's work for a fair day's wages," the new regulations made but little difference, but they pressed very uncomfortably on those idlers who for the last year or two had taken things easily, loitering for weeks over a piece of work, which, with ordinary industry, might have been finished in as many days. At last Peter Monk resolved to make a dust about it. He was not going to be put upon any longer; the new steward should find that out. He had always done as he liked ever since he came into the Duke's yard, and he always meant to, and the best man alive shouldn't make him give up that five minutes before the bell rang, or get a hand's turn of work out of him more than he had a mind to do.

Accordingly about six weeks after Gavin Rivers came, Peter *did* make a "dust" about it, which dust resulted, not as he had told his fellow-idlers it would, in the upsetting of the new regulations, but in his own upsetting, a contingency which he

had not thought of at all. He was dismissed from the Duke's yard at a month's notice. For a few days he prowled about the village, uttering vague threats against Roy, who he was quite sure had a hand in his upsetting ; and then he went up to London, where, as he told the people, he had plenty of friends who could set him on his feet again, and some of these days they should see him come back and take the shine out of them all. He did come back, certainly, in process of time, but not to perform such a brilliant exploit as that.

One of the new steward's first improvements was to plan a row of workmen's cottages on the piece of waste ground stretching away from the Mill-slip towards the Muchmarsh road. Pleasant, well-built little tenements they were, similar to those which had already been put up under Mr. Rivers's direction on the Duke's Devonshire estate ; with back-yards and a plentiful supply of water, and windows that opened at the top so as to ventilate the rooms thoroughly. Not so picturesque, perhaps, as Mrs. Cloudie's black clock establishment, or the labourers' hovels, whose thatched roofs nurtured quite a little garden of house-leek and cushion moss, and over whose damp, cracked walls

the lichens crept in pink and purple stains ; not at all suitable either for young ladies' sketch-books or photographic purposes ; but "precious handy," as Mrs. Cloudie—who was to have one of them—said, "for keeping oneself decent and living comfortable in." And when they were finished, the tumble-down, mud-built cottages which still disfigured one end of the village street were to be swept away, and workmen's gardens laid out in their place.

Three months after the steward's arrival, the brick work of these new erections was completed, and the Duke's carpenters, with Roy as foreman, were busily employed in preparing the interior fittings. It was pleasant work for Roy. No wonder he whistled over it so merrily, and planed away with such hearty good-will. For the end cottage was to be his own ; the best of all the row, with a little sitting-room window looking down Meadowthorpe street, and a slip of garden behind, where he could grow flowers and vegetables. And as he worked day after day in the timber-yard, measuring wood for window-frames, smoothing skirting boards, and fitting panels, he was thinking all the while of the time, not very far off now, when he should bring his pretty bird home to

its nest, and they should be so happy together.

Things had begun to look up a little at old Ben's cottage. It really did seem as if Providence had smiled on that bold step of Roy's. A fine sunny spring season, producing an unusually good crop of early vegetables, had enabled old Royland to work himself round a little. Trade, too, was brisker; he had had employment now from the Meadowthorpe shoe shop for three months running, and when he got his summer fruit, which promised to be very abundant, disposed of at the St. Olave's market, he hoped not only to be able to pay his own debts, but also to refund the money which Roy had earned for him by working over-hours in the Duke's yard. So that the young man might begin to think seriously about settling, if Bessie was agreeable to it, in the course of a few months.

But try as he might, Roy could not get Bessie into a proper frame of mind about that settling. Somehow, she always put him off when he began to talk about it. There was time enough for all that sort of thing, she used to say, and then she would fly off to something else as different as could be from anything like housekeeping.

For the first month or six weeks after she had

promised to be Roy's wife, Bessie Ashton was as meek and "pretty behaved" as any lover could desire. She dropped her eyelids until their long fringes almost touched her cheek, when she happened to meet Alick the smith, or the Bishop's tall footman, in the village; she never loitered, not she, to shake hands with Peter Monk, or listen to his whispered compliments. Roy did not like her to do so, and Roy was so good to her, he loved her so much, she must not vex him with her foolish ways any more now. And really she did not care one bit for the other men, she was quite sure she didn't; only it was so dull being always fastened up there at Miss Hepzibah's, that she was thankful for anything to help the time on a bit. But now, when she knew Roy loved her, the time went on quickly enough; no need for Alick, or Peter Monk, or the tall footman, to make it go faster. And she could put up now with Miss Hepzibah's scoldings, and Abigail's nasty snappy ways. Roy cared for her. Roy was kind to her; that was enough.

So Bessie thought for a month or six weeks after she and her lover had held each other's hands under that grey pollard-willow tree, by the haling-

bank road. Then the old nature began to wake up again. She did not see why she should keep herself so very snug, and never speak a word to any one else but Roy, and scarcely dare to lift her eyes from the prayer-book at church, for fear he should catch her looking at some one. Surely there could be no harm in just gossiping for five minutes or so with Peter Monk, at the west door, or stopping to ask young Alick how his mother was; or in listening to a civil word or two from the footman, who was always so polite and friendly, quite like a real gentleman; she thought that, after all, it was a little too much of Roy to expect her to behave like a nun, just because she had promised to marry him. There was Polly Rush, now, the whitesmith's daughter, who had got engaged to a young man at St. Olave's; Polly went about the village just the same as ever, and chatted with the men, and had a pleasant smile and a cheery word for every one; and why should *she* be forced to hold her tongue, and behave herself like a baby, just for fear of Roy? It wasn't reasonable, that it wasn't, and some day she would tell Roy so.

So thought Bessie, and thoughts like these, once

cherished, grow so quickly, and make themselves so important. Besides, she remembered what Mrs. Hastings had told her about men being but men, and having such a notion of keeping the women under, unless the women stood up well for themselves. And though, at the time Mrs Hastings said that, sitting up in the little best bed-room that looked down past the gaol to the St. Olave's road, Bessie had said to herself that she never could be too good to Roy, or too gentle and forbearing with him, even if he did put upon her a little, yet things began to look rather different now. And she thought, after all, she had better stand up for herself in a manner.

And then about that housekeeping business that Roy was always mentioning.

“There's time, plenty yet. I aren't going to bother myself with nothing of that sort for ever so long,” she used to say, when Roy, full of pleasant thoughts about the home nest he was making, told her he had seen such a nice handy set of drawers in St. Olave's, that he might have cheap, because the man was going to give up business; or tried to engage her sympathies on behalf of a kitchen table, “with drawers to put your dusters and things

in, Bessie, same as that there of Miss Hepzibah's," which he had been making in his spare hours ; or asked her if she would not go some night to the pot shop, at the Dykeland end of the village, and look at a set of tea-things that were marked at seven and sixpence. No, Bessie wouldn't do anything of the sort. She wasn't in a hurry to get married, and he might gather the bits of things together himself, and she didn't mean to give warning yet for a good bit, not until she'd got plenty of wage laid by to set herself off with new frocks and outside clothes. And if Roy couldn't wait, well, he might look out for some one else ; she didn't know but what she could get over it.

But oh ! if he *had* looked out for any one else. For Bessie loved him very much, more than she ever owned to herself. She dreamed about him all day long. His name was the first that came into her thoughts in the morning, the last that sleep chased away at night. If he brought her a cluster of roses or a bunch of violets from his father's garden, the little silly thing would toss her head and pretend she didn't care a bit for such like rubbish, and he needn't trouble himself to

bring her any more, that he needn't; but as soon as Roy's back was turned, she was away up into the whitewashed attic, to put the precious blossoms in water, and hide them behind the drawers, out of Abigail's sight, where she treasured them day by day, until, after many a kiss upon their soft petals, they withered, and then she wrapped them up in paper, and laid them at the bottom of her trunk.

Of course Bessie would not let Roy know this, no, not for the world; and she would not acknowledge to herself, far less to anyone else, that one smile from him, one loving look from those keen clear eyes of his, was worth more than all the compliments that Peter Monk had ever given her since the day he first shook hands with her at the back door of the Aspens. And to hide the real, true tenderness of her heart, she plagued Roy with a thousand little flirtish wiles, which after all were only wiles, very simple ones, too, but he did not know that. She would walk now and then with the tall footman, or have a chat with Mrs. Mac-turk's red-faced butler, and she didn't see any harm in being set home from church sometimes by young Alick; and Roy might throw back his proud head

if he liked, and say she had no business to do it, but she *would* wear those pretty blue ribbons that Peter Monk had given her, because, as he said, they suited her complexion so well. And Roy might look dignified if he chose, she didn't care a bit about it, no, she was sure she didn't.

Oh, Bessie! Bessie! once more, take care! The time may come when you will try in vain to wash out with tears, the bitterest you ever shed, the memory of those vain coquettish ways; when you would give all you have in the world if you had never seen Peter Monk, or walked down Meadowthorpe lane with him, or listened to his luring words, or worn the baubles he gave you. But it will be too late. Take care, Bessie.

Meanwhile Peter Monk was getting on famously in London; so he told one of his old companions. He had obtained a situation in one of the great West-end tailoring establishments, where he got good wages and not much work, and could walk about in the parks every Sunday, just like a gentleman. There was no place like London, he said, for getting on, and it was the best day's work that was ever done when the new steward upset him out of the Duke's yard; he wouldn't come back again,

not he, to be ground down as Mr. Rivers ground the Meadowthorpe people down. And then he asked how pretty Bessie was, and sent his respects to Mr. Roy, and said that some day he intended to serve him out for winning the rosy-cheeked beauty away from them that had as good a right to her as he.

Roy never knew about the letter. He was very glad Peter Monk had gone. He felt now as if he had Bessie more to himself. He had never felt really jealous of any of her admirers, except the engine-man, and he could not help feeling uncomfortable about him; for Monk had such crafty, back-handed ways. He would never do anybody any good, least of all a simple, inexperienced girl like his own Bessie Ashton. Besides, Roy was a frank, straightforward, honest-hearted fellow, who could not bear to feel that he had an enemy in the village; and ever since that hasty speech of his at the bridge-foot, it was silently understood amongst the Duke's men that Peter Monk and young Roy were "dead set agen each other, and that as sure as fate they'd finish it out some day afore long; and it would be a good thing, too, if blood wasn't spilt between them. For when one

man was jealous and passionate, and another was black-a-viced and guileful, there was no saying what might come of it."

So on the whole, it was, as Monk said, a very good day's work when the new steward turned him out of the Duke's yard.

CHAPTER XI.



ANITA RAEBURN, all unconscious of the dark threads which golden-haired Noelline was knitting up for her, lived day by day a life which was becoming richer and happier as her nature grew to take in more of the true beauty of living, its holiness and its worth.

Miss Hepzibah owned at last that Jane was a great comfort to her. For, though she would never make a woman in the highest sense of the word—that is, the housekeeping sense—and though it was plain that she did not give her mind, as Miss Hepzibah could have wished her to give it, to the preserving and pickling, and though the still-room was not in her estimation the land of Beulah, nor the kitchen a place of which she could say with any degree of truth—

" I have been there and still would go,
 'Tis like a little heaven below."

Yet still what she did do, she did well. And if the girl would only spend less time in that room which Miss Alwyne had given her at the Cottage, and a little more in studying her shelf of works suitable for young people—Miss Hepzibah believed some of them were not cut open yet—she would be, as girls went now-a-days, very passable—very passable indeed.

And the Professor. What did he think ?

Hitherto he had not been much beholden to feminine ministrations, except in the matters of cooking and linen mending. The time was long ago past now when he cared for a woman's hand to rest in his, or a woman's voice to whisper sweet words to him, or a woman's look to ray down sunlight into his poor old solitary heart. He could do without all that sort of thing at his time of life. But Janita was very useful. She understood him, so far as he could be understood ; she sympathised with that section of his nature which he opened to family inspection. She never *worretted* him as sister Zibie did, by questions about what he would like for dinner, whether he would have

his fish fried or boiled, his oysters raw or scalloped, his mutton chop dry or served up with gravy. She never interrupted his meditations on Motive Forces by coming to ask if his new shirts should be made with round wristbands or square ones, or getting away his study coat to send it to the tailor's, or bringing some little fidgeting message about tea being nearly cold. That was pleasant. To be let alone was all the feminine ministration Professor Ruthven needed, and that ministration Janita fulfilled. All that she had to do for him was done when he was out of the way. During his afternoon naps she would mend his pens and sharpen his pencils and replenish his great inkstand, the inkstand which had been filled and emptied so many times since she came to Meadowthorpe, without any visible results either to the public or the printing-press in the shape of "copy." She learned also to mix his daily morning portion of whisky toddy, as no else in the house could mix it, and to cut his sandwiches in mathematical lines, which was the way he liked them cut. In fact, she did everything for him that a wife could have done under the circumstances.

And though he never thanked her for all this,

never by word or look or smile—if indeed the Professor could smile—told that she was making his life more pleasant, still he appreciated her in a quiet fashion; and if she had gone away, would have missed her. Perhaps, after all, this is the way in which many of the best women in the world get thanked for what they do, and they are content with it.

Such was Janita's home life. It might have been more to her taste, but such as it was she made the best of it. Miss Alwyne had taught her the beautiful truth, which it were well for all women to learn, that nobleness consists, not in doing great things, but in doing little things with a great spirit; that there is nothing so worthy as a simple performance of duty, nothing so grand as the faith which sees God's purpose for us in the meanest little things of daily life, nothing so holy as the love which does all for Him and nothing for self. With that love and with that faith any woman may make any life sublime.

But, as the lily plant creeps out gradually from its bulb into newer, greener life, while yet that brown, unsightly bulb serves a purpose, ministering sap and moisture to the young leaves, and after-

wards to the fragrant flower, so out of Janita's humble, domestic life there grew another more beautiful, yet ever nourished and strengthened by those homely duties which are to a woman what the bulb is to the lily plant, invisible, yet needful.

There were pleasant evenings with Mr. Rivers ; for after that first call which he made at the Aspens, Gavin often used to come in on his way home after riding over the estate and superintending alterations. Sometimes he and Professor Ruthven got into long conversations about Scotland and the old places and families which they had known or heard of. But oftener the Professor sent out a message from his study that he was very much engaged just then, but if Mr. Rivers would be kind enough to wait a few minutes he would come to him. Which few minutes meant half an hour, or an hour, or perhaps an entire evening, especially if a paragraph on Motive Forces stuck fast in the middle, as was frequently the case, or a problem grew perverse and would not let itself be solved, And then, whilst Mr. Rivers sat by the window, looking out into the dim, old-fashioned little garden, Janita would play for him those Highland reels, to which she and Agnes and Willie Home had so

often danced, or she would sing him the sometimes plaintive, sometimes humorous Scotch ballads, which had charmed away so many hours in Inverallan Manse, only a year ago.

Only a year ago ; and yet it seemed such a long time. Nay, that whole Inverallan life seemed quite slipping away out of memory now, as white-sailed vessels, watched from shore, sink beneath the round sea. She did not think of that life mournfully, as we remember the happy time when grief has come. There was no sadness for her in the days that had gone away. Only they seemed so strange and far off now, like days that had been lived in some other world.

Besides—for the scheme was given up at last, Dr. Maguire said she must not be kept to it any longer or it would kill her—there were sweet talks with Miss Alwyne for many and many an hour ; and solitary mornings in the little attic room up at the top of the Cottage, which Miss Alwyne had given her for her own, a sort of little study, where she might come and be quiet whenever she liked. There Janita brought her writing-desk and her books and her work. There, as she sat alone, many beautiful thoughts nestled in her heart,

creeping out by and by, as true thought-music will sometimes do, into song. And one day a wild notion suggested itself. She would show some of these to Miss Alwyne. And she did show them to Miss Alwyne. And Miss Alwyne said nothing, but she smiled her own quiet smile, and sent the verses to that friend in London who had been staying with her a few months ago; and next time Janita saw them they were speaking to her out of the pages of one of the most popular magazines of the day.

After that she sang many a little song, which others hearing, wondered who the singer was that charmed them so. But no one found out; least of all did Aunt Hepzibah suspect that the wee lintie she had caged and brought away from its Inverallan woods, to starve on patent hemp-seed, had found for itself a voice, and was singing so cheerily. Ah! the lintie sang, now, out of the gladness of its heart; would it ever sing, as the sweetest songs are often sung, for very pain and weariness, for the thorn that presses so hard against the singer's breast?

So the months passed on until July came in, July which steeped even Meadowthorpe in a beauty

all its own. For the elm trees in the lane by Miss Alwyne's cottage were heavy with leaves which the sunlight veined with gold, and the dew gemmed with diamonds. And the tall brown grass began to quiver in the meadows, with many a head of crimson clover and violet cranesbill peeping out amongst it. And all over the half stagnant dykes, white and yellow water-lilies bloomed upon their shining green leaves, and amongst the tall flag-stems shot up many a golden iris, with brown reed-flowers, and feathery grasses, which nodded over their own reflection in the still, sleepy waters beneath.

And as the days went on, and the sunshine poured down ever warmer and warmer, the forget-me-nots opened their blue eyes all over Meadowthorpe marsh, that wide, fertile, often-flooded tract of land which stretched away past the Hall to Dykeland. Such forget-me-nots, so rich and rank and plentiful, like great beds of turquoise, all along by the water-side; there were no forget-me-nots in all the country like those which grew in Meadowthorpe marsh in the hot July time. Whilst they were still blossoming, the mowers came with their scythes, whistling merrily as they came, and

the little children, with shouts of laughter, buried each other beneath the fragrant hay, and village maidens coquettled with their lovers amongst the loaded waggons, or gossipped under the cool shade of trees, whilst the brawny labourers emptied flagon after flagon of home-brewed beer, and munched their afternoon meal of bread and cheese. Oh! who would say that Meadowthorpe was a dull place in the sunny July time? Not Janita. For she had learned to love it now, and the days no longer wearied on with slow, sad monotony, and her life was full of beauty, and her heart of springing hope. Why she was happy she could not tell. It might be the summer and the sunshine, and the young blood that coursed through her veins, and the health that sparkled in her eye and flushed her cheek. Or it might be something apart from all these, and quite independent of them, something which had sprung up unawares, and was filling her with gladness.

Her favourite walk was down by the moat-side, a narrow stream, bordered with pollard-willows, which wound along from the Aspens, through some meadow-lands, to the Hall farm, and after forming a boundary to that for two or three hun-

dred yards, joined Meadowthorpe dyke just below old Ben Royley's garden. Nearly at the end of it was a shelving place in the bank, where the cattle came down to drink. Two old thorn trees, one on each side the moat, intertwined their gnarled branches in a sort of arch, through which you might see as pretty a picture, pretty, at least, for its rural gracefulness, as any in all the country round. Scarce a field's breadth away, so near that you could count the white roses, and distinguish the fanciful outline of the carved box trees on its balustraded terraces, stood Meadowthorpe Hall, its brazen weathercocks flashing back the sunshine, its oriel windows gleaming through clustered ivy. A little to the right rose the old church-tower, half buried in sycamores and chestnut trees; farther away still, the white chimneys of Miss Alwyne's cottage peered out amongst the elm trees of Meadowthorpe lane. Sound there was none but the whispering of the leaves, or the cawing of the rooks in early summer-time, or the flutter of a swallow's wing, as it dipped for an instant into the still stream, and then flew away again.

Here Janita often came with her books or work, and here all alone she sometimes wove those little

songs which one day made her famous. Here, too, she came with her sketch-book the Wednesday evening before that quiet little party at the Hall, to which she, and Longden Narrowby, and Elene Somers were invited.

She was bending over her work, so intent upon it, that she did not hear the splash of oars in the water, nor see a boat with its tiny sail spread, until it was close upon her and some one called her name.

The oarsman was Gavin Rivers. He did not appear surprised to find her there. With just a word or two of greeting, he steered his boat close to the water's edge, so that, still standing in it and leaning against a piece of overhanging bank, he could see what she was doing.

"And so you are trying to perpetuate the beauties of Meadowthorpe. Nay, do not put your work away just yet," he said, as Janita was hurrying her sketch out of sight. "Let me look at it. I will promise not to be critical."

Janita brought it out again and handed it to him.

"It is not worth criticising. Young Mr. Narrowby told me this was a good piece of practice.

He has offered to give me a few lessons in sketching from nature, and this is the first thing I have tried."

"And pray how are young ladies taught to sketch from nature, Janita? Does it mean a great many pleasant walks and cosy conversations on grassy banks in front of a 'prospect,' with calls upon each other afterwards to look over the sketch and get it corrected?"

"Oh no, nothing of the sort," said Janita, quietly, without either blushing or smiling, though Gavin's eyes were fixed intently upon her. "Mr. Longden just makes me a few points on my board and tells me a little about the perspective; then he leaves me to do the rest by myself, that is all."

"Is that all? Well, let us see what progress you make under this amateur teaching," and Gavin took the sketch which she was still holding out to him.

She had only made a few outlines here and there, to indicate the leading features of the landscape. But in those strokes there was the promise of power. By them the feeling of the picture was given with that clearness and decision which only an artist, one who loves his work and has

sympathy with it, can command. The sketch, rough and unfinished, was already far beyond the pretty landscapes which are turned out so complacently from young ladies' boarding-schools, and admired with such delight by proud papas and mammas at home.

"I do not think Longden Narrowby can teach you much. You do it well. I suppose you must be fond of sketching."

"No, not very. At least I like it well enough, but I would rather look at a beautiful picture and thoroughly enjoy it in my own mind, than copy it on paper, and after all get such a poor, weak impression of it."

"So would I," said Gavin.

"And you know, Mr. Rivers, this is such a pretty picture."

"It is. It is a *very* beautiful picture."

But Gavin Rivers was not looking at the old Hall with its red gables, steeped now in the warm glow of sunset and closed in by the overhanging branches of whitethorn trees. He was looking at Janita's face as she sat half turned from him ; her little hand lifted to shade the sunlight from her eyes.

It was not what the art books would call a perfect face. Very different from that of Elene Somers, where every feature was chiselled with the clearness and finish of a piece of Greek sculpture. A painter would scarcely care to copy it, for its charm lay not in form nor colour but in that changeful play of expression which can never be transferred to canvas. Yet it was just the face to attract a man like Gavin Rivers, because it was the index of a character in which he would find something to oppose, something to conquer.

“But we must not loiter here much longer,” he said, at last, “I have been down to the Aspens to ask Aunt Hepzibah if I might put you into my boat and row you through the Hall farm to Meadowthorpe marshes, to see the sunset over them. You told me once you would like to see it. Will you go now?”

Janita’s bright smile left no need for any other answer.

“But did Aunt Hepzibah say I might? You know she is so very particular about my going on the water.”

“It is all right; only I am under a promise to

bring you safely home before dusk. Now let me help you into the boat."

But Janita did not need helping. She just placed her foot upon the edge and sprang lightly in, without either screaming or trembling or seizing hold of the benches, as ladies generally do under such circumstances. The Inverallan maiden was evidently not "nervous on the water."

"Must I steer?" she asked, going to the seat at the end of the boat and arranging the ropes with a practised hand.

Gavin could not help smiling at her; she did it with such simplicity and girlish eagerness.

"I see the work is not new to you. You are accustomed to the water."

"Oh! yes. I have had many a pleasant row all by myself on Inverallan loch."

"By yourself? Then you know how to manage an oar."

"If you will let me take one, I can try."

"Very well, then we will let the steering alone for the present. There are no turnings until we come to the marshes."

He gave her one of the oars, and made her sit before him, that he might see how she managed it.

She rowed with the light, graceful, regular stroke of an experienced oarswoman, keeping exact time with Gavin's oar, so that the little craft shot along straight as an arrow over the still waters of the dyke.

It was very pleasant. On they glided between beds of green flags, through whose shining leaves the sun, sinking now, sent many an arrowy beam of light; past clumps of yellow iris that glistened like golden flowers amongst the tall rank grass; past clusters of cool white water-lilies, and solemn-looking brown bulrushes, that nodded mysteriously to each other in the evening sunshine. Janita had often rowed on Inverallan loch with the Manse girls, in that old square boat of Willie's, that big clumsy boat which would almost let them play at blind man's buff in it, it was so steady and strong. But though Willie had been there, laughing and telling them his funny stories all the time, and though Inverallan loch was one of the fairest in Scotland, though on its placid waters was many an islet of pine and fir-tree, beneath whose shade the blue-bells trembled, and the brackens shook out their great green leaves, and though all around it were heathery mountains which wore the sun's

golden coronet on their brows, and purple robes of mist upon their stately forms, yet no row on Inverallan loch had ever seemed half so pleasant, or left behind it half so sweet a memory as this, down the slow sleepy current of Meadowthorpe dyke, all around them the level marsh with its clumps of pollard willows and its muddy pools where the wild fowl screamed and the sentinel herons stood waiting for their prey. And afterwards, when quite other cares and duties had replaced the simple Meadowthorpe life, there was no memory dearer to her than this, none more full of the bitter-sweet which joy departed leaves behind it.

Gavin enjoyed the evening too. He made Janita give up the oar by and by, and sit in the steering-place just opposite to himself, where he could watch her face, so full of keen eager pleasure. They spoke of many things, of Gavin's life in South America, of all his toil and struggle since he came to England, of his plans for the Meadowthorpe estate—he found Janita could enter into these and understand them as well as even Mr. Narrowby himself, or the clerk of the works; and then she told him of her old home in Scotland, and this new Meadowthorpe home, and how dull

and wearisome its round of employments had seemed until she learned to brighten them by the touch of—

“That famous stone,
Which turneth all to gold.”

There was a great charm to him in her way of talking. She was not afraid of speaking out the thought that was in her, even when it clashed with his own. She talked to him without restraint, unconsciously revealing her true character, that fine, clear, sensitive nature, womanly, and yet strong, pliant, but resistant. There was much in that nature which he could not understand. Perhaps this new feeling of being baffled and thrown back, charmed him more. Often, when he thought he had succeeded in reading her thoughts, some unexpected turn bewildered him, some chance expression that opened out a quite new track. She was so girlish, so humble and unaffected; yet he could not penetrate her nature, he could not master her, child though she might be.

There are some people who have no contrariness about them. You cannot get to the wrong side of them. They say as you say, they think as

you think, they agree with you in everything. And such people are wearisome. They tire you ; they are like a piece of velvet which gives way under your hand at every touch. Such were the people with whom Gavin had to do in his own home. Mrs. Rivers had long ago conquered all the natural force of her character, and trained herself into absolute passivity with regard to external things. And Noelline, because of the very depth of her artfulness, forbore, except at rare intervals, to oppose openly. Her words and ways were soft as satin ; she kept her talons out of sight, never letting you suspect them until the wound was made. Janita ; shy, bright, intelligent, fascinated, whilst she perplexed him. Here was no white-winged dove which would nestle for ever in sweet content within the hand that fed it ; instead, a wild little sky-lark, soaring and singing as it soared, very uncertain in its flight, wheeling upwards and then dropping again, then soaring out of sight—a song and nothing more—but always coming back when the song was over, to the nest, the little nest in the field where its treasure was. And Gavin felt as if he could willingly let the lark soar out of sight sometimes, so only the nest

was his to which it came for peace and safety and shelter at last.

The sun had dipped below the level line of the distant fields before they reached that part of Meadowthorpe dyke which flowed under the high stone wall of the Hall garden. A moss-grown flight of steps led through a gateway into the laurel walk. Gavin moored the boat here and helped Janita up the slippery and somewhat dangerous ascent.

Noelline was sauntering about amongst the flower-beds. There was a peculiar look upon her face as she came to meet them. Not a look of smilingly concealed displeasure like that with which she fetched her brother away to show him Miss Alwyne's etchings that night at the Cottage. It was a soft, velvety, tranquil look, matching tones as soft and velvety when she took Janita's hand in hers and said—

“ Ah ! you must have had such a pleasant evening. I am so glad Gavin thought of fetching you. They say Meadowthorpe marsh looks lovely in the sunset. I don't care for it, you know, after our charming scenery in Devon ; but you would enjoy it, I am sure.”

"And now I shall not ask you," she continued, still holding the young girl's hand in her jewelled fingers—"I shall not ask you to come in to-night, for I know your aunt is very particular; but you must come very early to-morrow, and we will have such a delightful time. Gavin, you must not let her go home alone; you must walk with her, it is so late. Good night, Janita, darling. Now don't forget to come early to-morrow."

Why did not Janita love her? The lips that touched hers in that light kiss were smooth as young primrose leaves; the parting gesture of farewell as Noelline stood on the Hall steps, was full of matchless grace. And yet. And yet. Janita felt so glad when Gavin Rivers drew her arm in his and led her away down the quiet sheltered St. Olave's road, out of sight of that smiling face and those rippling golden curls.

Noelline was in the great dining-room when her brother came back from the Aspens. He sat down in the shadow of the curtains, away from her. He seemed very quiet, and she knew better than to disturb him by idle words. For nearly an hour they kept up that silence; then Gavin spoke—

"Noelline, will you remind me that someone

attends to those steps. I did not know they were so dangerous."

"Those steps by the mooring gate, you mean, I suppose? Are they dangerous?"

"Yes. Janita Raeburn nearly slipped upon them this evening."

"I will try and remember."

Then silence again, long silence; Noelline watching him all the time through her drooped eyelashes.

"I must have the boat repaired, too. It will be pleasant to go down the moat sometimes in an evening when the sunset is clear."

"You enjoyed it then, this evening?"

But Gavin said nothing to that. A few minutes afterwards he wished his sister good night.

"It is all right," she murmured to herself when he had gone away. "I knew it would be so."

CHAPTER XII.

H! Miss Jane, you *do* look pretty this afternoon. I think I never seed you look so pretty," said Bessie, as she twined the tartan ribbon amongst Janita's locks, and arranged the folds of the pink muslin dress which was to make its appearance for the first time at Miss Rivers's "quiet little party." "You *do* look pretty, and I can't help telling you so, though I ought to ask pardon for saying it to your face."

Bessie Ashton was very fond of her young mistress. Things had changed for the better wonderfully since Janita came to the Aspens. There was always one bright young face now to look upon, however frowning and scowling the others might be. When Miss Hepzibah well nigh plagued the life out of her with those endless screamings and

scoldings and cautions and admonitions, or Abigail took one of her jealous fits, and darkened the kitchen from morning to night with a face as black as a thunder cloud, Miss Jane's pretty ways, always pleasant and good-tempered alike, acted as a sedative. And many a time when, between mistress and cook, poor Bessie was driven to tears, Janita would find some excuse for requiring the girl's attendance upon herself, and by a few kind words things were put straight again.

But Bessie had other reasons besides these for being so fond of Miss Raeburn. She knew very well how it was that during the last three or four months she had so often been sent on errands into the village, after the Duke's men had left work, and Roy was hammering away in that little shed of his at the end of the cottage ; not too hard though to hear a gentle knock, which made him turn down his shirt-sleeves and take his grey blouse from the peg, and smooth back the light curling hair in readiness for ten minutes' chat amongst the rose-bushes of old Ben Royland's cottage garden. Bessie knew, too, through whose intercession it was that once a month on a Sunday afternoon, when Abigail had gone out, and the kitchen was at

liberty, Roy was allowed to come and spend an hour with her, walking up to the little gate in the wall just like a real gentleman, and not slinking round to back doors, with stealthy steps, as if he wanted to do something that was not proper. Miss Hepzibah had stood out very vigorously at first against such an infringement upon old established customs. She had no notion of men coming hanging about the premises in that way, there was no telling what mischief it might lead to. In *her* young days servants had to do their courting out of doors in the best way they could, and she didn't understand why things should be done differently now. She had never troubled any one with *her* courting, and other people should not trouble her with theirs. Besides, everyone knew that when once girls got a notion of marrying into their heads, there was an end of work. Things were left to go on anyhow. In her opinion there was nothing that turned good servants into bad ones so soon as a love affair; and that was why she had never allowed followers during all the thirty years that she had had the management of a house.

But when, after one or two trials of the new

system, she found that instead of there being an end of work, the work was never done so well, and with such a hearty spirit, too, Miss Hepzibah magnanimously relented, and said Janita might take her own way in the matter. Nay, more, when Bessie's quarterly "afternoon out" came round, and the poor girl was so distracted with face-ache that she could not stir across the door-step, our worthy maiden friend said that she did not mind if the young man, being quiet and well-behaved, came in for an hour or two ; and she actually let them have the little back parlour to themselves nearly all the afternoon. And I do not think she was any worse for the unwonted display of consideration. In one sense, indeed, she was a gainer ; for not many days after that happy face-ache experience, Bessie came into the dining-room, blushing like a peony, with something wrapped up under her apron.

"Please ma'am, Roy's duty, and would you mind accepting of this?"

And then Bessie darted out of the room, and was away back into the kitchen before any one had time to see what "this" was. It proved to be a very pretty little book-stand, which the young man,

during spare evenings, had carved out of a piece of oak. Oh, dear! what a quite unusual thing it was for Miss Hepzibah to have a present! She could not believe for a long time that Roy had not sent the book stand in for her to look at, hoping that she would offer him a price for it. However, when Janita had convinced her that it was a free gift, all for love, and nothing for reward, Miss Hepzibah sent out her regards, and she was extremely obliged to the young man, it was very thoughtful of him. And when the message had been given, she went to the window and wiped a tear out of her eye.

Poor Miss Hepzibah! She might have been a different woman under different circumstances.

Of course, after that little display of chivalry, there could be no more falling out between mistress and maid—at least not for the present.

So that it might be the glamour of a loving heart, and not entirely Bessie's taste for the beautiful, that made her say, when the momentous toilet was accomplished—"Oh! Miss Jane, you do look so pretty this afternoon!"

I believe, though, Bessie Ashton was quite right. Janita did look prettier than usual, as she stood

before the glass in her pink muslin frock, arranging the tartan snood amongst those bands of shining dark hair. For it is true that beautiful thoughts dwelling in the heart, do stamp their impress on the features. And all through the day there had been such clear sunshine in *her* heart, such a keen, bright sense of coming joy! And now it was so near; only one little half-hour between her and that quiet evening, the hope of which had been so pleasant, whose memory would be so sweet.

Even Miss Hepzibah could not forbear to notice the improved personal appearance of her niece.

“Blessings on us!” exclaimed that stanch despiser of female loveliness, as Janita presented herself for inspection. “I declare you grow wonderfully like your poor mother. And what a colour to be sure! But it’s the fever, that’s what it is. I always say that an illness, when it’s properly attended to and nursed as yours was, is a capital thing for tightening up the constitution, and clearing off bile, and freshening the system in a general way. There then, child, you can go,” and Miss Hepzibah gave her spectacles a thrust, and went on with the great linen sheet, which she was turning sides into the middle.

With a low laugh, that often carolled through the musty old house now, Janita tripped away, taking the haling-bank road to the Hall; for that was the most retired, and her pink dress looked rather conspicuous in the sunshine. She would scarcely have put it on for such a very quiet little party as Noelline said this was going to be, only she had heard Mr. Rivers say, not long ago, that pink was such a pretty colour for the summer time; and then he had asked her whether she never wore pink, for he was quite sure it was a colour that would suit her.

That was why Janita looked like a little rose as she went dancing along the haling-bank road, by the tall flag-leaves and reed-grasses which swayed and fluttered in the July sunshine.

As Miss Rivers said, "it was just a family party, two or three friends in a quiet way." Only Elene Somers and Mr. Longden Narrowby were there, besides the Professor and Canon Hewlet, who, when Janita arrived, had been standing by the fountain pond for more than an hour, holding each other by the button-hole and discussing Greek derivatives. They—the Canon and Professor—left immediately after tea, for Dr. Hewlet

had promised to take the chair at an Institute lecture in St. Olave's, and the Professor was appointed to move a vote of thanks on the same occasion. Neither, as there were no elderly ladies, did Mrs. Rivers make her appearance, so Noelline had the whole conduct of the evening in her own management.

Very well she managed it, too. She had arranged her plans beforehand. Not a single move was made during that "quiet little affair" without due forethought and contrivance. After the two gentlemen had taken their departure, she proposed a stroll in the garden. And then, when they had sauntered for a few minutes in the laurel walk and amongst the new rose-beds, Gavin must take Miss Somers to see that pretty view by the moat side—"that view of the Hall and church, Gavin, you know; it would make such a charming sketch for Elene's portfolio." And it would have been so nice for Janita to go too, but she was afraid of the dear girl taking cold, as she had only thin boots on; and she should be so grieved if anything were to happen, particularly as Janita was not very strong. So Mr. Rivers and the tranquil St. Olave's beauty went alone, Noelline, and

Longden Narrowby, and Janita lingering still amongst the rose-beds, greatly to Longden's satisfaction. For there was nothing he liked better than talking to Miss Raeburn, though he had not as yet summoned courage to say anything that might lead to that troublesome business of house-furnishing and ash-pan fitting.

Miss Somers was delighted when she got to the moat side. She had no idea there was such a lovely prospect so near St. Olave's. It was exquisite, it was perfectly romantic. Could Mr. Rivers spare her a blank leaf from his pocket-book, and had he a pencil to lend her? She really must get an outline of it at once, whilst the impression was fresh upon her mind. Oh! it was so *very* kind of dear Noelline to think of giving her such a treat; there was nothing she enjoyed so much as sketching from nature.

Mr. Rivers, having both paper and pencil, was obliged to lend them. And then, as it would have been the height of rudeness to leave his fair companion, he must needs stay by her side until the sketch was finished. And if, as the sunlight crept through her flaxen ringlets and glowed upon the marble-like beauty of her face, Gavin thought for

the first time that Elene Somers was a remarkably elegant woman, it was only a very natural thought, and one which he held in common with many other people.

When they came in, twilight had fallen and lamps were lighted in the great drawing-room. "A little music would be so delightful, would it not?" And Noelline was quite sure that dear Elene could play without notes. She must sing one of those charming Italian songs of hers. Which she did. And, of course, Gavin, being the host, must conduct her to the piano and stand by her until the performance was over. Which he did too. That was another successful move.

Then Janita was called upon for a little Scotch ballad. But she did not sing it nearly so well as when Gavin had heard it last in the drawing-room of the Aspens. For there was a sad, disappointed feeling at her heart, she knew not why; and she would rather have cried than sung. Miss Rivers saw that clearly enough. And when the ballad was finished, she insisted upon Janita singing a duet with Longden Narrowby. Had she not heard them sing together once? Noelline said this with a slight emphasis. Yes, she was sure she had. So

they did sing, and Noelline declared she had never heard anything so beautiful ; their voices were really made for each other, and they ought always to sing together, they ought indeed. Then she appealed to Gavin, who was sitting by Elene Somers—ought not Janita and young Mr. Narrowby always to sing together, their voices blended so perfectly ?

And Gavin, though he could not see Janita's face, had a full view of Longden's, which was beaming with satisfaction.

Conversation followed the music. Such quiet cosy conversation ; for there being only five of them, just a nice little family party, they could all sit together in the deeply-recessed window, and everyone could hear what everyone else said. And as they talked about Meadowthorpe affairs and Meadowthorpe people, it was so easy for Noelline to convey, by little chance words and recollections, the impression that Longden Narrowby was exceedingly intimate at the Aspens ; an impression which Longden did not take pains to contradict, as he might have done had he been disposed.

“That evening, you know, Mr. Longden, when I met you going across to the Professor's with a

volume of poetry for Janita ; you remember it, I am sure." Or—"A week or two ago, when Miss Raeburn was helping you to arrange those seaweeds for the bazaar." Or—"That afternoon when I called at Gablehouse to see those beautiful designs of yours, and I was so disappointed, for you had just taken them to the Aspens." And as Noelline threw out these little feelers, she looked across many times from under her eyelashes at Gavin, who was making talk for Elene Somers, with a cloudy expression of countenance that contrasted strongly with the serene smiles of the St. Olave's belle. Yes, everything was working in the right direction.

At last Miss Rivers started up as if a sudden thought had struck her.

"Oh! Gavin, I had quite forgotten. I must show Janita those beautiful feather flowers from Rio. I am sure she would like to see them so much. Miss Somers, you will excuse me for a few minutes, will you not, because you know if I don't go now, most likely it will escape my memory again. I have such a wretched memory. Will you come, dear?"

These last words were addressed to Janita, who

followed her graceful hostess out of the drawing-room, up the brilliantly-lighted staircase, and into that same little pink-curtained boudoir where Noel-line and Tip used to have so many confidential interviews. Tip was lying on the hearthrug now, coiled up in a lump; one eye shut, the other open, to make observations on anything that might be going forward.

The feather flowers were soon disposed of. That was a very small part of the business which Miss Rivers intended to transact during this quiet little *tête-à-tête*.

“Oh! we will not go down just yet, darling,” she said, as Janita, having expressed a suitable amount of admiration, was about returning to the drawing-room. “Do not run away so soon. You know I have wanted all the evening to have a chat with you, but really young Mr. Narrowby has monopolised you so completely that I could not get a word in. Do sit by me now, and we will be quiet for a minute or two.”

And Miss Rivers drew Janita to a low seat near the lamp, so near to it that as she herself leaned back in her easy-chair, she could note every

shifting expression which passed over the young girl's face.

"We ought to be such *very* good friends, you know," and as she said this she laid her fingers upon Janita's, which were cold, very cold for July, "because I remember you such a long time ago. At least you know I can't remember it very well, but our old servant used to tell me. You were a little baby then, oh! such a tiny little baby, only so long, look!"

And Noelline held her hands about half a yard apart.

"Not a bit longer than that. And you used to cry such a great deal, and no one could keep you still but my brother Gavin. He used to walk up and down the deck with you very often, and you used to lie so quietly in his arms. But I dare-say he has told you all about that himself, has he not?"

"Old Ilsie has told me. Old Ilsie was the nurse that came over with mamma."

Somehow Janita could not speak of Gavin Rivers to his sister, or tell her of any of the pleasant talks they had had together about that long ago time.

"Nurse Ilsie ? Oh ! yes, the old Scotchwoman. What a long time it is since all that happened, and what a great many changes there have been since then ! Such a very great many !"

And then they were still for a few minutes. Janita turned towards the half-open door, through which the sound of music from the drawing-room could be heard. Noelline, who marked everything, marked that look. But she had not quite finished all she had to say, and she took Janita's hand again playfully.

"Yes, I see you are anxious to run away. I know there is an attraction in the drawing-room, and I daresay there is some one there who would very much like to sing another duet with you. But we will just stay here a little longer, it is so nice and quiet. Janita, dear—" this was said after a second short pause—"I wonder if you ever think about marrying and having a home of your own."

There is no impertinence so odious as that which dresses in blue crape, and wears silver wheat ears in its hair. And it is the more odious because you cannot give it its true name. Who could have the boldness to say that Noelline Rivers was im-

pertinent? Noelline, with her golden curls, her fine, clearly-chiselled features, her inimitable grace of mien and gesture. Noelline impertinent? The thing was simply impossible. Call her question "friendly," "confidential," "interesting," anything else you like; but do not call it impertinent.

Three months ago, Janita would have laughed a merry denial, and a true one too. But she could not help the rush of colour which came to her face now, nor the confused incoherence of her words as she replied—

"I—I don't know, I'm sure. At least, I suppose every one thinks about it just a little."

"Ah!" said Noelline, "I have found you out. That tell-tale face of yours cannot keep a secret. You are such a little transparent thing. Well, I won't tease you, and I won't tell anyone else about it. I am sure Mr. Longden is very fond of you, and, as you say, everyone thinks about such things now and then. It will all come right."

Something like a flash of indignation shone through Janita's eyes now.

"Miss Rivers, don't. I don't care a bit for Mr. Longden Narrowby; it isn't true, I'm sure it isn't. And he doesn't care for me."

“Oh! don’t you?” and Noelline smiled her own peculiar smile. “Well, I really did think—but if you don’t like it we will not talk about it any more. Only, my dear, you must let me say that I think he does like you just a very little bit.”

And then there was another pause, which Noelline broke by saying, in quite a different tone, a thoughtful, serious sort of tone—

“I often wish Gavin would settle. It is so much better for men to marry, is it not, Janita, dear?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps it is.”

“Yes. I am sure it is. But, you know, my brother is not a marrying man. I do not think he ever will marry?”

“Indeed,” said Janita. And she only said that because she felt that Miss Rivers was searching her face for an answer.

“I really do not think he will marry. It is such a pity. But, you know, men at his age are hard to please. When a man has passed thirty, he is not easily caught. I know several ladies who have tried to fascinate my brother, and tried unsuccessfully. One in particular was very

anxious about it ; but she was very much younger than he, and I think there is nothing so ridiculous as disparity between husband and wife. Now, don't you think, Janita, that disparity between husband and wife is very ridiculous ?”

And with those cold piercing eyes resting on her face, Janita could only say that disparity was indeed very ridiculous.

“Yes. I was quite sure you would think so. And I hope my brother will never marry in that way. But indeed I do not think he will ever marry at all. He has been so disgusted by ladies trying to make an impression on him. That sort of thing is so very offensive to a man of taste. Don't you think it is ?”

“Yes.” And again Janita looked towards the door.

“Now you are tired. And I am afraid you find this room too hot, for you look pale rather.”

“Oh no. Only I am afraid Miss Somers will think it strange for us to leave her so long.”

“Well, perhaps she will. You are a thoughtful little creature to remind me of it. But, you know, I was enjoying this quiet time so much, it is so pleasant for friends to get a little talk together.

Now, hasn't it been a nice little talk, Tip?" and Noelline took the lump of black shiny wool upon her knee.

Tip looked up in his mistress's face and winked, as if he quite understood all that had been going on. Yes, it had been a very nice little talk, a very nice little talk indeed.

Just then a footman came to the door to announce supper. And before supper was over, Mr. Mabury's man arrived with the chaise for Miss Somers. But it was not Noelline's intention that Miss Somers should go home in the chaise with Mr. Mabury's man.

"Elene, dear, *do* let me send the man back again. The moon will be lovely in half an hour, and Meadowthorpe looks so exquisite by moonlight. Do stay and walk home by and by. I am sure Gavin will be so happy to go with you; he quite enjoys a walk in the moonlight. Now, may I not send the man back?"

Miss Somers was quite willing that the man should be sent back. She dearly loved a moonlight walk, especially in the country. And if Mr. Rivers would not think it too much trouble, &c. So that little matter was settled.

By half-past ten the whole party were on their way to Meadowthorpe, Noelline standing at the Hall door to notice how they arranged themselves. They had scarcely passed the great iron gates which led out into the St. Olave's road, when she came lightly tripping down the steps.

“Oh, Janita, dear, I forgot; my memory is so treacherous; and, Mr. Narrowby, will you just come back for one moment? Elene, do not wait. I only want one word with Mr. Narrowby.”

So of course Elene walked on with Mr. Rivers, and Noelline gained her point, which was to throw Janita Raeburn and Mr. Narrowby together. The messages were a mere excuse:—her love to Miss Ruthven, and she would be calling at the Aspens very soon; love to Miss Narrowby, too, and it had been such a disappointment not to see her at the Hall that evening. Then Longden and Janita, arm in arm, set off to the village, Mr. Rivers and his graceful companion being about a hundred yards in advance of them. Just as Noelline intended that it should be.

So far the game was in her favour. A few more moves as successful as those she had made this evening, and the adversary would be checkmated.

CHAPTER XIII.



HEY all came home by the haling-bank road, past the dyke-side, which did, indeed, look very beautiful for once, with the moon-beams glistening upon its slow, sleepy current, and flashing in many a silver thread amongst the tall flag-leaves that trembled on its brink. And Miss Somers had quite a flow of conversation, such as it was, that night, so that there was never a pause for Gavin to turn round and see how Janita was faring with her companion.

The haling-bank road took them into Meadowthorpe by the lane which led past Miss Alwyne's cottage, and Gablehouse. There Longden Narrowby was deposited, rather to his disappointment, for he would willingly have gone with Janita to her own door; but Gavin, who had waited for

them at the top of the lane, said he would see Miss Raeburn safely home, so Longden was obliged to submit. Next, Elene Somers was dropped at the Rectory, after lavishing a shower of smiles and thanks upon Mr. Rivers, and assuring him she had never enjoyed anything so much for a long time, as that walk by the dyke-side, the moonlight was so very lovely, and it was so very kind of Mr. Rivers to have walked with her, and she was so much obliged to him.

Gavin bowed politely, though he did not say that *he* had never enjoyed anything so much for a long time. Then he took Janita's arm in his, and they went on to the Aspens.

It was but a little way; only just across the Square, and up the narrow plot of ground which lay before the Professor's house; yet, to both of them, it was very welcome, like the benediction, always sweet and strengthening, which comes after a long, dull sermon. For, though Gavin Rivers could not deny that Miss Somers was a very superb piece of womanhood, as perfect as flaxen ringlets and creamy complexion, and beautiful shoulders, and unlimited amiability could make her, still she was very monotonous, altogether too

placid and tranquil when compared with Janita, in whose bright, sensitive nature he found a strange charm. The Dean's daughter would be an admirable wife for any one who wanted a magnificent lay figure to sit at the head of his table, and show off to the best advantage the handsome dresses he gave her, and display the family diamonds upon her snowy arms and bosom, and in sundry other ways keep up the respectability of his position. But for a companion, one who would have to be lived with, and talked to, and studied, for ten, twenty, or thirty years—Gavin found himself involuntarily pressing closer the hand that lay upon his arm. No, Elene would weary him. There was not change enough in that bland, serene face of hers. There was nothing in her to comprehend, nothing to find out. She was largely beautiful, that was all. Not so this child, this little Inverallan girl, with her shy, fawn-like ways and beautiful thoughts. She was ever new, ever fresh, like one of her own Scottish mountain rills, bounding along through shade and sunshine, making glad, sweet music as she went.

So thought Gavin Rivers. At least, he thought so then. And what did Janita think ?

It was pleasant, now and then, to listen to Longden Narrowby's elegant, poetic thoughts, to talk with him about their favourite books, or look over his designs, and help him to make fresh ones. But as for leaning upon him, trusting to him in anything—as for putting herself into his keeping, and giving him the right to rule over her, to say she should do this, or she should not do it, to control her ways of acting and of speaking, as a husband would have the right to control them—no, that could never be. And the conviction was slowly growing up in Janita's mind, that only to this Gavin Rivers, who was walking by her side now, could she give any right like that.

Oh ! Noelline ! Noelline ! why could you not let them alone ?

They had come into the Professor's garden now. The white leaves of the aspens were quivering in the moonlight. Alternate bands of sheen and shadow lay upon the quaintly-cut flower-beds, and the square, trim grass-plots. But there was only shadow upon them as they stood together by the front door, beneath the mouldering old coat-of-arms, belonging to some quite extinct family, that was carved upon its stone pediment.

"Well, child!" said Gavin Rivers—he often called her "child," now—"has it been a pleasant evening?"

A pleasant evening? And nearly the whole of it, except that dreary little half hour in Noelline's boudoir, had been spent in forced conversation with Longden Narrowby.

If Janita Raeburn had been a coquette; if she had wanted to try her power over this new friend, she would have smiled a gay, bright smile, and answered, carelessly enough—"Oh, charming! I enjoyed it thoroughly, it was so very pleasant"—and then looked up archly to note the effect her words produced. Many young ladies in Meadowthorpe would have done so, perhaps many young ladies anywhere else would have done so too. But there was no coquetry in Janita's disposition. She had not yet learned the art of provoking people by little white lies, which, though spoken with the daintiest of accents, and the most bewitching of smiles, are still white lies, nothing else. In truth, that evening had been far from happy. There had been an under-current of weariness and disappointment running through it, deepening at its close almost to sadness. And that talk with Noelline

Rivers had left a very bitter taste in her mind. She answered simply ;

“No. It was not quite so pleasant as I thought it would be.”

“I saw that, Janita. I have learned to read your face a little. You hide nothing there. It was not so pleasant as our row down Meadowthorpe dyke the other evening?”

“No.”

That “no” was very emphatic. It told a great deal ; more perhaps than Janita intended it should tell.

She was a unique creature in her way, this Janita Raeburn ; simple, innocent, transparent as a little child, speaking out her thoughts so honestly, with so little of reserve or conventionality ; yet hiding within her nature depths of thought and feeling which even Gavin Rivers, accustomed as he was to study character, failed to sound. She was like one of those little rock pools on the ocean shore, to whose shining, sea-weed tangled floor you would think a hand’s-breadth could reach ; but try, and you will find that arm’s-length does not fathom it.

“Shall we go there again some night, Janita ?”

“Yes, I would like it. I would like it very much.”

“Then we will. I have given orders to-day about having the boat repaired. It is scarcely fit for a lady to step into now, I did not think it had been so bad before I had it out last night, but when it is painted up and finished, I will come and fetch you.”

To which promise there was a laughing flutter among the aspen trees, as if some voice, perhaps Noelline’s, was saying mockingly—

“Will you, though?”

But they did not hear what it said, only the pleasant flutter of leaves in the moonlight.

Gavin Rivers never knew why he did it, or whether he ought to have done it at all; perhaps it might be because she looked such a mere child standing by his side at that old shadowed doorway. But he stooped down and kissed her forehead when he had given her that promise. Then he left her, meaning to come and see her again many and many a time; meaning, when his sister Noelline was married, to take that little hand in his and keep it there for ever.

So, a wayfarer, passing through some woodland

glen might stay to pluck a single flower from the woodbine which trails its heavy laden stems through the copse and underwood. To-morrow he will come again and take away the plant. He will set it in his own garden, his hand shall water it every day, and its blossoms shall be all for him. But when he comes to-morrow the woodbine is gone. Another hand has stolen it for another garden. He will see it again no more.

Janita wished her aunt and uncle good night and then went away to her own room, to lean her arms on the low window-seat and think over that evening which was to have been so pleasant.

Standing beside Gavin Rivers, her hand in his, the sense of his presence filling and quieting her as it always did, she had forgotten that dreary time in Noelline's boudoir. But now, in the solitude of her own room, it came back to her again. Every word that Miss Rivers had spoken, her gesture, the tones of her voice, her keen, searching looks, the curl of her lips as she said—"You know I think nothing so ridiculous as disparity between husband and wife,"—all these things returned with startling vividness. And with them a sense of wrong done

to her, of injury, almost of insult. She felt as if she could thoroughly dislike Miss Rivers now, as if she ought to dislike her, as if she had plenty of reason to dislike her, as if it were a right and just thing that she should dislike her. If Janita had been a man, and Noelline had been a man too, Janita would have liked to have come to an understanding with her there and then and knocked her down and given her a beating, a real good beating. And because Noelline Rivers was not punishable in that way, not a man at all, but a very graceful and winning young lady, a young lady that must be smiled to and assented to and treated politely, Janita got angry about it, and her eyes began to flash and her lips to quiver, and she beat the window panes impatiently with her little fingers, the fingers that had lain in Gavin Rivers's hand not half an hour ago.

I admit that it was a very wrong state of mind, and one that a young female who had been judiciously trained, such a female, for instance, as Maria or Julia or Selina Narrowby, would never have allowed herself to get into. Nevertheless, I ought to speak the truth, and Janita *did* feel just like that.

But why?

Ah! that was the question. For when Janita began to think about it and turn it over in her own mind, she was so angry with herself that Noelline's words had had the power to make her feel as they did. That was the very sting of them. Why could not Miss Rivers say, if she liked, that her brother was not a marrying man? There was no harm in it, was there? She was sure Aunt Hepzibah had said the same thing over and over again about the Professor. Or, if Miss Rivers had said so to anyone else, Miss Alwyne, for instance, would she have felt so grieved? Or, if Miss Alwyne had said it herself—indeed, when Janita looked back, she believed that Miss Alwyne *did* once say something of the kind, not long after the new steward came to Meadowthorpe, and she was sure it did not vex her then. And why should there be any meaning for her particularly, in those words—“You know I think there is nothing so ridiculous as disparity between husband and wife.” Disparity *was* ridiculous, was it not? Janita settled in her own mind that it was. Very well, then, why trouble herself any more about it?

But Noelline had said something else about a

man of taste—meaning, of course, her own brother—being so disgusted when young ladies tried to entangle him into matrimony. And Janita remembered the searching look which Noelline cast upon her as she said those words; she could feel even now, the galling, inexpressible sense of injustice which stung her all over when she listened to them. Why did she feel like that? Was it a friendly caution on the part of Miss Rivers? Did she think that Janita was trying to entangle her brother, like some of those other young ladies? And was Miss Rivers “talking at” her when she said, over and over again, so very explicitly, that there was nothing so absurd as disparity, and that she was quite sure Gavin was not a marrying man?

Oh, that thought was humiliating. It made her bite her lips until the blood almost started from them. And then there was a pause of thought whilst Janita tried to quiet herself by listening to the cool, leafy flutter of the aspens in the garden. It was not much use, though. She might as well go on and get her thinking done.

Mr. Rivers had never asked her to care for him. He had never paid her any special attention, never been “marked,” as Miss Narrowby would have

called it. What consequence was it to her, then, his marrying or not marrying? Or, suppose he was to marry someone else, Elene Somers or Emily Graham? Well, go on, Janita.

But Janita could not go on.

She remembered something that she had seen in the "Guide to Female Excellence." She got the book down and read it, sitting on the window-seat in the July moonlight. Yes; there it was, in large, clear, legible type, in the third paragraph of the twelfth chapter, headed—"The choice of a partner for life." And Janita forced herself to go through with it steadily, word by word. Of course, if the Guide said it, it must be true.

"I hope it is needless for me to remind any of the young ladies whom I am addressing on this momentous subject, that no woman possessing the slightest delicacy of mind and feeling, will ever allow her affections to fix themselves, uninvited or unsought. The woman who so far forgets herself as to perpetrate an indiscretion of this kind, forfeits the regard due to her sex, and is justly left to endure the misery which her folly has produced."

There, Janita, what can you say to that?

Janita could not say anything to it. And because she could not say anything to it, she banged the book on the floor.

That was very well, so far as it afforded an outlet for her feelings, and prevented her from doing something worse—breaking the window, for instance, or biting her lips until they bled. But if the book was true, no amount of banging that poor Janita might inflict could bang the truth out of it. Had *she* been doing such an indiscreet, unwomanly thing as the maiden author of the Guide, &c., deprecated? Had she been suffering her affections to stray? Was she standing midway between a background of folly and a foreground of misery? Had she, as the inexorable book said, “forfeited the regard due to her sex,” and was she to be pushed forward into the misery which, according to letter-press, was the just reward of her evil deeds?

One thing she knew. Never in all her life had she felt so miserable and bewildered as she did that night. And one other thing was certain; that sentence of Noelline's, “But I feel certain my brother will never marry, Gavin is not a marrying man,” brought with it a dull sense of pain. And then as bad as this pain, quite as bad, was the bitter

humiliation of knowing that Noelline Rivers had been "talking at her," had been cautioning her against trying to entangle the new steward. Now, she should never be able to talk to him any more in the old free happy way, never be able to sing to him again or try to please him with her simple Scotch ballads, or the Highland reels he always used to ask her for when he came to see her uncle in an evening. Most likely Noelline would tell him all that she had been saying to Janita up there in the boudoir, and caution him too, put him on his guard against being entangled. Then, of course, he would never come again. Ah, well! perhaps he had better not, for all the sweetness had gone out of their friendship now. He would despise her, and she should feel afraid of him, nothing but that.

Then poor Janita went to bed—not thanking God this time though, for making her life so beautiful. And if, before she fell asleep, a few hot bitter tears stained her pillow, you will not be too harsh upon her. And if she made up her mind too, that for the future she would be as stiff as possible with Mr. Rivers, and never speak to him when she could help it, and certainly not

go with him down the moat any more as she had done only one little day before, I am sure you will say that, if not the wisest, it was at least the most natural resolve she could take, and one for which the Guide to Female Excellence would have praised her.

CHAPTER XIV,



HAT was Janita's resolve before she went to sleep, when she was jaded, weary, utterly unable to think clearly about anything or see her way through the labyrinth of possibilities and probabilities which those vexing insinuations of Noelline Rivers' had seemed to cast around her. But everyone knows that resolves made by moonlight often prove unwise when morning sunshine rises over them. Miss Hepzibah had reason on her side when she said that a thing is never properly weighed down until you have gone to sleep upon it. When Janita woke in the morning, refreshed both in body and mind, that wearisome little half hour with Noelline Rivers appeared in quite a different light.

After all, now that she could think calmly over

and young Mr. Narrowby? Just a tiny bit, you know. Now don't be so cruel as to say you won't tell me."

Cruel? Who could be cruel to any one so sweetly simple and unaffected as Noelline Rivers? Not Mrs. Narrowby certainly. She dearly loved to be confidential with her friends, to have them confidential with her. Besides, things were very different now from what they were when, four months ago, Miss Rivers had made the same inquiry. Then expediency behoved that Mrs. Narrowby should vehemently contradict the report. There was not a particle of truth in it, not a particle; the child was led away with a few harmless attentions, girls are so foolish, you know. Now, expediency behoved nothing of the sort. There could be no harm now in allowing Miss Rivers to remain in possession of the theory. Indeed it might tend to dispel the notion, if such a notion ever existed, that Mrs. Narrowby was seeking a bride from the Hall for her son. And Mrs. Narrowby had the impression, which most mothers seem to cherish about grown-up sons, that they need only ask and have, in matrimonial speculations. And so the good lady put on a pleased,

smiling air of mystery, as she replied, laying her hand confidentially on that of Miss Rivers—

“ Well, you know, these things are not generally made public so soon ; but I really feel that friendship obliges me to tell you, and I am sure you will not mention it again. I assure you it would give me the greatest pleasure to receive Miss Raeburn into my family, she is so admirably adapted to Longden in every respect, so very intelligent and lady-like, besides other little advantages which a young man of prudence is justified in taking into consideration. And they have my best wishes, my very best wishes.”

Mrs. Narrowby had not told a story, had she ? Nothing of the sort. The mistress of Gablehouse, and the leader of Meadowthorpe respectability, would not have told a story for the world. But she had conveyed the impression that an engagement actually existed between Longden and Janita. And she had also done, what for some time past she had been anxious to do ; convinced Miss Rivers, that her son had not been aiming his attentions at the new family from Devon.

Noelline's course was clear now. After a little more general conversation, she rose to depart,

out for herself a path in the world, a path which should lead her by and by to fame and competence. For Miss Alwyne kept her secret faithfully, and Meadowthorpe was not a place to which much literary news found its way; and the cashier of St. Olave's bank was a quiet, incurious sort of young man, who never troubled himself by more than a business glance at the cheques which Janita, with the quiet pride of well-earned success, brought to him now and then from her publishers. So that as yet Gentility Square slumbered in peaceful security, not knowing that a "chiel was amang 'em, takin' notes."

Janita came back again to the Aspens just her own simple, natural self. In the evening her new resolve was tried. Noelline had come to the Rectory to spend the afternoon with Miss Somers, making Gavin promise to call for her very early. He did call for her, not so early though as to prevent him from taking the Professor on his way and spending an hour in the old-fashioned drawing-room. Janita coloured up just a very little as she came to meet him; those words of Noelline's could not be forgotten all at once, though she did try very hard to put them out of her thoughts.

Perhaps he noticed the flush and the hesitancy, perhaps he did not. However he staid a long time, chatting with the Professor and Miss Hepzibah, and when, just before he went away, he shook hands with Janita, saying, "Good night, my child," the sunshine all came back again, she was as happy—at least, almost as happy as ever. After all, Noelline's move had not been so very successful. She must try again.

Meanwhile, Longden, who was always such a good lad to his mother, was following out Mrs. Narrowby's instructions with regard to Miss Raeburn. Ever since the premature blighting of his Hall prospects, he had been very diligent in his attentions at the Aspens. Miss Hepzibah did not appear to discountenance them so much as might have been expected. Possibly she was too much engaged with her pickling and preserving to note those multiplying rings at the front door bell, followed by the rattle of a dainty little cane in the umbrella-stand, and the tones of a gentle musical voice in the dining-room, where Janita sat with her books or work. Or, perhaps, she thought that if the young man did come with "intentions," those intentions would involve no serious mischief to her

niece, but rather the contrary. The Narrowbys were excellent people, very excellent people, stood on a good foundation of their own, had an unlimited stock of respectability, and were everything that could be desired in a social point of view. The young ladies, too, would be charming sisters-in-law, would exercise such a wholesome influence upon "Jane," keeping her somewhat wayward and impetuous disposition in check by a constant exhibition of the highest style of female propriety. If the girl must marry, she could not enter a more suitable family.

Besides, there was no telling what providential dispensations might take place at the Aspens. If anything were to happen to the Professor—for though at present he was a tough old man, and showed no signs of decay, and the Ruthvens had always been remarkable for haleness of constitution, still men could not be expected to last for ever—and when the time did come for anything to happen to brother Jabez, his niece would be left in a very unprotected state, without either father or mother, or any one to look after her. And Jane was the last person who ought to be left in such an unprotected state, being of a shiftless

turn, and having no gift for pushing her own way in the world. Just fancy Jane now, forced to get a living for herself ! What a muddle the poor girl would make of it ! She had better "settle" if she had the opportunity. Settling was on the whole a good thing for young people, though Miss Hepzibah had never patronised that mode of gaining a livelihood.

Perhaps some such thoughts as these passed through the mind of the Professor's sister as she skimmed her preserves and poured them into jars, and covered them with little paper caps, and labelled and arranged them in long lines round her store-room, where their daily prospect afforded her more pleasure than ever bibliopolist gathered from his shelves of calf and Russia leather. But at any rate, whether Miss Hepzibah gave her mind to the consideration of the subject or not, young Mr. Narrowby kept calling and calling, until at last, after letting him in, Bessie Ashton would say to herself, as she went back to the kitchen,

"I declare it's that young man again ; whatever does he come so often for ? Miss Jane don't care for him, I know. Miss Jane don't care for anyone particular about here, as I can see."

That convenient little sea-weed business broke the ice. After that, Longden easily found excuses for dropping in. Sometimes he came with a message from Selina, who wanted a design drawing for fancy-work; and Miss Raeburn drew such very pretty designs, much prettier, Selina thought, than anything that could be got in the St. Olave's shops. Sometimes he came on his own account, to bring a book of poems recently published; such very beautiful poems, he really could not resist running across with them, he was sure Miss Raeburn would enjoy hearing one or two, if he might read them to her. Or he had just finished a water-colour sketch, and would Miss Raeburn be so kind as to give him her opinion of it? He knew Miss Raeburn had perfect taste in water-colour landscapes; such a correct eye for form and tint. And it had struck him that the middle distance in this particular sketch was not exactly the thing, rather too hazy, objects not clearly enough defined.

Something like young Mr. Narrowby's intentions. For as yet he had never come to the point. The whole affair was still in beautiful uncertainty, steeped in sunlit morning mist, no hedgerows or turnip-fields at all visible, nothing but aerial vapour,

from which perhaps a little of the purple tint had begun already to fade.

Not all of it; oh! no, nothing of the sort. He was quite sure he cared for no one else as he cared for Miss Raeburn. She was so intelligent and bright and sensible. She understood him so well, and appreciated him very much better than any of the young ladies to whom he had taken a fancy in time past. And it was so pleasant to go in for an hour in an evening, really he should feel quite at a loss if he had not those visits at the Aspens to look forward to, now and then. Only there was no need to say anything just yet. He quite meant to say something some time, but not just yet. Perhaps some one might turn up who would suit him better, though on the whole he did not think that was probable; because Miss Raeburn was so very intelligent and companionable and pretty-looking, besides having a nice little fortune, enough to pay house-rent and find a pony-carriage. No; he did not think any one else would turn up. Still, he would not say anything just yet.

Longden Narrowby was doing about the most dishonourable thing that a man can do without

bringing himself under the penalty of law. True, he might be doing it thoughtlessly, but still the thing was the same. For nearly six months he had been acting in such a way as to make the people of Meadowthorpe believe that he was really engaged to Miss Raeburn. He had dropped in on some pretext or other, at all hours of the day. He had walked home with her from church Sunday after Sunday. Gentility Square, with its fifteen or twenty pair of eyes, doing nothing all day but peering out of front windows and behind muslin curtains, had seen him regularly once or twice a week going through that gate in the high red brick wall, about tea or supper-time, and coming out again an hour or perhaps a couple of hours afterwards ; and pray who was there to attract him so often in that direction but Miss Raeburn ? And was it likely that Professor Ruthven would allow any young man to loiter about the house in such a manner, unless some understanding had taken place ? No ; there would be a wedding from the Aspens before long, Gentility Square was sure there would, and the Misses Narrowby would be bridesmaids. The Professor had been very fortunate in disposing of his niece so soon, considering

the limited facilities which Meadowthorpe afforded in a matrimonial direction.

But for once Gentility Square was mistaken in the Professor. Longden might have boarded at the Aspens altogether, if he had been so disposed ; he might have established himself for a permanence in that same easy-chair which he found so comfortable one or two evenings every week ; he might have hovered round Janita like her shadow, and the Professor would scarcely have been conscious of it, certainly he would never have taken any notice of it. And as for the propriety of the thing, Jabez Ruthven lived so completely out of the world, that its little niceties and conventionalities had no existence for him ; he never troubled himself about them. So long as Janita sharpened his pencils and replenished his ink-stand at due intervals, and mixed his toddy properly, and cut his morning sandwich with mathematical accuracy, she was not likely to be interfered with by her uncle in other matters. And we know already in what light Miss Hepzibah viewed young Narrowby's visits.

By and by the Meadowthorpe gossips began to tease Longden about his extreme intimacy at the

Aspens, and to ask him, with meaning looks and smiles, if he had seen certain pretty houses on the St. Olave's road which were advertised to be let. Longden laughed the matter off ; but young men always do laugh such matters off, so that went for nothing. Besides, as the gossips said, actions spoke louder than words, and so long as that little gate in the high red brick wall opened once or twice a week to admit Longden Narrowby with his messages and books of poetry, he might laugh it off as he liked. Meadowthorpe knew better than to take such denials as those.

Still, it never occurred to the young man that he was doing wrong, that he was acting meanly, that he was placing Janita in a false position, exposing her as well as himself to the gaze of vulgar curiosity. He saw no harm in keeping open for himself a place which perhaps he never intended to occupy. He was simply ministering to his own gratification. His friendship at the Aspens was very pleasant, he could not afford to let it go. It cost him nothing ; he did not think how much it might cost her.

So that if Noelline Rivers had had any right to mention the subject at all—which she had not—

there was certainly some foundation for the jest with which she provoked poor Janita during that unfortunate little half hour in the Hall boudoir.

But the steward's sister needed more definite information before she could bring her plans into action. The time had now nearly come when she might insinuate to her brother that Janita was simply amusing herself with him. She had watched carefully the progress of his affection for the young girl. She had observed, as only artful natures can observe, how Janita's name had sunk from common daily speech into the still waters of thought. Seldom spoken now, she knew it was remembered all the more faithfully. She had waited long enough. All that she wanted now was a confirmation of the report which had so long been floating amongst the female gossips of the place. This secured, she could see to the end of her game. And it was to put herself in possession of it that she sallied forth, one bright August day, with Tip at her side, to make a round of morning calls, the first of which was to be at Gablehouse.

No wonder that Miss Rivers was so popular. There was scarcely a lady in Meadowthorpe, Miss Alwyne excepted, who did not believe herself the

especial favourite of the new steward's sister. If she went to call at Aubrey House, she had been longing so to have a chat with Miss Matilda, there was nothing she enjoyed so much as a call upon Miss Matilda, it was so different from going to see the other people in the place, and Noelline made a pretty gesture with her gloved hand, which consigned the "other people in the place" to oblivion in the waste-paper basket of her affections. And when, at last, she rose to take leave, she was so sorry to go, so *very* sorry to go; but dear mamma being such a recluse, she was obliged to spend so much time in general visiting, which was such a nuisance, "So different, you know, from a call upon you, dear Miss Matilda." Whereupon Miss Matilda's Norman haughtiness melted into a smile, it was so kind of dear Miss Rivers to feel such an interest in her. And then dear Miss Rivers would glide gracefully away, and say just the same thing to half a dozen people in succession, all of whom received it as perfectly sincere.

That was what she said to Mrs. Narrowby, in the beautiful Gablehouse drawing-room, considering all the time how the conversation could be guided into a channel from which she might gain

the desired information. It was soon accomplished.

No one knew better than Noelline Rivers how to make her way round to any subject which she wished to reach. Beginning with the weather and the new cottages which were being built from Mr. Narrowby's plans—such very pretty plans, too, as Noelline observed in passing, it was really quite an advantage to the estate to have such an able architect as Mr. Narrowby—she worked her way onwards to the Duke's workmen, handsome young Roy, and the rustic wedding which was to take place by and by in the village. From Roy's bride-elect, pretty Bessie Ashton, the transition was natural enough to Miss Raeburn, and the gossip which was afloat in the village concerning her matrimonial prospects.

“Ah! my dear Mrs. Narrowby,” said Noelline, looking at the mistress of Gablehouse with one of her prettiest smiles, “it is so very naughty of you not to trust me. You know I am not a gossip, not at all, and I should so like to feel that you treated me as a friend. Now do tell me, is there not just a tiny bit of truth in the report I hear about our charming little friend at the Aspens,

and young Mr. Narrowby? Just a tiny bit, you know. Now don't be so cruel as to say you won't tell me."

Cruel? Who could be cruel to any one so sweetly simple and unaffected as Noelline Rivers? Not Mrs. Narrowby certainly. She dearly loved to be confidential with her friends, to have them confidential with her. Besides, things were very different now from what they were when, four months ago, Miss Rivers had made the same inquiry. Then expediency behoved that Mrs. Narrowby should vehemently contradict the report. There was not a particle of truth in it, not a particle; the child was led away with a few harmless attentions, girls are so foolish, you know. Now, expediency behoved nothing of the sort. There could be no harm now in allowing Miss Rivers to remain in possession of the theory. Indeed it might tend to dispel the notion, if such a notion ever existed, that Mrs. Narrowby was seeking a bride from the Hall for her son. And Mrs. Narrowby had the impression, which most mothers seem to cherish about grown-up sons, that they need only ask and have, in matrimonial speculations. And so the good lady put on a pleased,

smiling air of mystery, as she replied, laying her hand confidentially on that of Miss Rivers—

“ Well, you know, these things are not generally made public so soon ; but I really feel that friendship obliges me to tell you, and I am sure you will not mention it again. I assure you it would give me the greatest pleasure to receive Miss Raeburn into my family, she is so admirably adapted to Longden in every respect, so very intelligent and lady-like, besides other little advantages which a young man of prudence is justified in taking into consideration. And they have my best wishes, my very best wishes.”

Mrs. Narrowby had not told a story, had she ? Nothing of the sort. The mistress of Gablehouse, and the leader of Meadowthorpe respectability, would not have told a story for the world. But she had conveyed the impression that an engagement actually existed between Longden and Janita. And she had also done, what for some time past she had been anxious to do ; convinced Miss Rivers, that her son had not been aiming his attentions at the new family from Devon.

Noelline's course was clear now. After a little more general conversation, she rose to depart,

apologising for her short stay by urging the many calls which she had to make in the Square.

“ You know, dear Mrs. Narrowby, in consequence of mamma’s seclusion, I am obliged to go about so very much amongst the people. It really becomes quite a burden sometimes ; but I always enjoy calling upon you, I do indeed ; it is such a pleasure, you know, to have a quiet chat with a friend. And give my very kind love to the young ladies, and tell them how sorry I am not to see them this morning—quite disappointed. I am so very unfortunate whenever I come to Gablehouse. Now, Tip darling, is my pet ready ?”

Tip jumped down from the embroidered velvet cushion on which Mrs. Narrowby had placed him, and waddled after his elegant lady-superintendent, shaking himself and winking very briskly, and turning his little black head on one side, in a way which said as plainly as possible—

“ Capital sport this morning, my lady !”

CHAPTER XV.



NE by one the August days slipped silently away, leaving here and there a golden stain upon the Meadowthorpe lane elms, and many a fallen leaf beneath the clump of aspens in the Professor's garden. The primroses had long ago shut up their delicate petals, the blue hyacinths had shaken out the last waft of perfume from their drooping bells, the wind flowers had shed their white leaves, like a snow-fall, upon the winding path in Miss Alwyne's garden. Only a few wild geraniums, staunch, hardy little things, that feared neither heat nor drought, struggled up amongst the dusty grass by the roadsides. And as you passed down the St. Olave's road, bounded as it was on each side by the richly cultivated lands of the Meadowthorpe farmers, you might see the barley

swaying to and fro in the summer breeze, and the corn-fields gathering from day to day a deeper tinge of golden brown, which told how soon the reapers would be at work, binding their sheaves, whilst the village maidens twisted bands for them ; stopping now and then to look coyly up at the great sturdy harvestmen, who never worked too hard or whistled too loudly to spare a gallant word for the women-folk.

By and by, as the days still crept slowly on, leaving more and more fallen leaves beneath the trees, and a warmer tinge upon the corn-fields, the village people began to cluster together in little groups, talking over the great event which was soon to rouse quiet Meadowthorpe into a state of unwonted excitement. The Hall wedding was drawing very near now. Early in September, so Elene Somers said ; and as she was going to be head bridesmaid, Mrs. Mabury was quite sure she might rely upon the information. The whole affair was to be on a scale of unprecedented grandeur ; unprecedented, at least, since the last great wedding twenty years ago, when the late Duke's youngest daughter married the eldest son of the Marquis of Muchmarsh, and all the village people had new

dresses, and the children cakes and plum-pudding, and ale flowed down the streets like water.

Meadowthorpe did not expect anything of that kind on the present occasion. Still, there would be a great commotion in the place, and much merry-making amongst the common people, and a wonderful display at the little musty old church, where workmen were already cleaning and decorating ; and Destiny Smith was practising the choir three times a week, in a grand wedding anthem, to be sung whilst the bridal procession was going out. Lycet, the ladies' maid at the Hall, told Mrs. Braysøn the constable's wife a little of what might be expected in the way of dress. Such a cluster of bridesmaids, all alike—though she could not tell exactly yet what they were going to wear—such a list of grand ladies and gentlemen from London, friends of the bride and groom, who would bring down the latest town fashions, and almost provoke the Gentility Square people to throw their new bonnets into the fire ; they would look so antiquated beside the Bond Street chapeaux, and Paris millinery. Then there was to be a grand ball in the evening, and new dresses for all the maids, and white gloves and ribbons for the school

children, who were to stand in a row on each side the churchyard path, and scatter flowers before the bride. Oh ! but it was to be something like a wedding. Trust Miss Rivers for having everything done in first-rate style ; so Lycet said as she sat in the constable's front parlour, telling Mrs. Brayson all about it.

But other facts, more interesting even than those which related to the actual ceremony, gradually oozed out as the time wore on. The Duke's workmen were to have a grand treat ; so Mr. Andrews, the clerk of the works, had happened to say one day inadvertently in the hearing of one of the men. And then, having once set their curiosity in motion, he wisely thought he might as well tell them the whole truth, and let them have the pleasure of looking forward to it.

There was to be a tent then, erected in the great field just before you came to the Hall garden ; and in this tent all the Duke's men, numbering nearly a hundred, were to sit down to a dinner of roast beef and plum-pudding, with ale as much as they could drink in moderation. Afterwards, there were to be sports in the field for all the village people, old English games, running,

leaping, wrestling, racing, cricketing—all being finished by tea and a dance in the evening, to both of which everyone who chose might come. Lastly, it came out that Roy and some of his fellow-workmen had formed themselves into a committee for decorating the village, from the Hall to the church gates. What the decorations were to be, no one knew exactly, but one thing was quite certain, if Roy had the management of them they would be well done.

Roy's cottage was completed at last, timber work and everything else. He had got the front parlour papered, and he was now employing his spare time in making a cupboard to fix up at the top of the stairs, where Bessie might keep her sheets and table-cloths, and a few of the best cups and saucers, and such things. He had heard her speak about a cupboard something like it, where Miss Hepzibah kept her best things of that sort, and he did not see why his little cottage should not be as complete in its way as the Aspens. Mr. Andrews, too, let him have the use of one of the iron lathes in the Duke's yard, and Roy had been turning a pair of candlesticks and other little fancy things out of a piece of choice South

American wood, which the steward had given him. So that when everything got put up in its right place, and the glass ornaments arranged on the mantel-shelves, and Roy's Scripture prints, which he had bought in St. Olave's, hung on the newly-papered walls, and the fuschias and geraniums set in the broad low window-seat, that little front parlour would look very pretty, a great deal prettier, at any rate, than the disagreeable old whitewashed kitchen where Bessie spent all her time now. But Bessie knew nothing about these things, for Roy had determined that she should not see the inside of the cottage any more until the day that she went into it as a bride.

And that day was not so very far off, though no one knew the trouble he had to get a settlement about it. There was no hurry, Bessie used to say, whenever he got upon the subject. She didn't care about getting married, not she. And no ; she wouldn't tell Roy when he might speak to Mr. Smith about getting the banns asked in church, she didn't mind if she never got asked in church at all. If he was in such a bustle to get married he had better look after some one else. Abigail would be fine and glad of a husband, she dared say,

the limited facilities which Meadowthorpe afforded in a matrimonial direction.

But for once Gentility Square was mistaken in the Professor. Longden might have boarded at the Aspens altogether, if he had been so disposed ; he might have established himself for a permanence in that same easy-chair which he found so comfortable one or two evenings every week ; he might have hovered round Janita like her shadow, and the Professor would scarcely have been conscious of it, certainly he would never have taken any notice of it. And as for the propriety of the thing, Jabez Ruthven lived so completely out of the world, that its little niceties and conventionalities had no existence for him ; he never troubled himself about them. So long as Janita sharpened his pencils and replenished his ink-stand at due intervals, and mixed his toddy properly, and cut his morning sandwich with mathematical accuracy, she was not likely to be interfered with by her uncle in other matters. And we know already in what light Miss Hepzibah viewed young Narrowby's visits.

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Bessie was in great perplexity about what dress she should wear at the Hall wedding; for she knew that all the young women in Meadowthorpe would get new things for the tea-party and the dance in the evening. And though it made no difference to her now, in a matrimonial point of view, whether she looked well or not, still she should like to hold her own amongst the rest of them. Of course she must stand up with Roy, and perhaps with Alick Midgley, or the bishop's footman; and if the red-faced butler from Mrs. Macturk's should request the honour of her hand, as it was most probable he would do, she did not know that she could refuse him. It would look rude, besides leading people to think that Roy had her too much under his finger and thumb. And if she did stand up with the butler, who wore a cambric neck-tie and had such smart whiskers, she really ought to have a new dress. That blue and white spotted print would look so shabby. And she was quite sure she shouldn't enjoy the evening a bit if the ugly old ladies' maid from the Rectory had a better gown than herself, or if Mrs. Narrowby's cook came out in a tucked muslin with lace round the neck, and she, who always looked

so nice in clear starched muslin, had to go in nothing but print. Yes, she ought to have a new frock, that she ought.

But then—and here was the awkwardness of it—she had been saving up her money to buy something real pretty for her own wedding. She must have everything new on then, and she didn't see how, out of nine pounds a year, she could afford two wedding dresses, muslin ones too, and nicely tucked, to equal that of Mrs. Narrowby's cook. Or, even supposing she did get them and pay for them honestly, the Duke's architect or the clerk of the works or somebody else might notice them, and think that she was spending too much money over her dress, and then it would injure Roy with the steward if his wife was thought to be too extravagant. And that would be worse, ten times worse, than having to stand up side by side with the red-faced butler in a spotted print, or being compelled to cross hands with the Gablehouse cook, who had got a new gown, flounced up to the very waist.

So Bessie turned the matter over in her mind as she lay awake many an hour in that white-washed attic, listening to Abigail's resonant snores, or those more subdued, which proceeded from Miss

Hepzibah's apartment. And after balancing the subject carefully, looking at it from various points of view, she came to the conclusion not to get a new dress after all. It would appear extravagant, yes it would. So the blue spotted print must be done up again, and perhaps freshened with a bit of new lace round the neck and sleeves ; and if Mrs. Narrowby's cook *did* turn up her nose at it, or if the cheese-complexioned lady's-maid from the rectory made remarks about it, well, let them ; her turn would come by and by.

But Roy had been thinking about it too, and he took the matter out of Bessie's hands.

"Bessie," he asked one morning, as they met just opposite the baker's shop, after the bell had rung for the Duke's men to leave work. "Bessie, what are you going to be in at the wedding?"

"I am not going to have nothing new, Roy. It'll be time enough to smarten up when my own wedding comes about ; but I'm sure I don't know as it will. There's a vast of things as never happens at all."

Roy ignored the terrible contingency involved in this last clause.

"Don't you mean to get a new gown, then ?

Well, I'll warrant if you was to go in the oldest you've got, you'd look as bonnie as any of 'em. 'Tisn't fine feathers makes fine birds. But, Bessie, if you *did* get a new frock, what sort of a one would you have? There's no harm in folks thinking what they'd like, even if they don't get it."

"Oh, there's lots o' pretty colours. There's rose pink, that's my favourite. But—" and Bessie's cheeks turned rose pink too—"I've settled to wear it after a bit, maybe. And then there's that pretty sort o' green as Miss Jane wears sometimes. I daresay I should suit it as well as she does, though she is so sweet-looking, bless her. And there's—But it's no use. I ain't going to get nothing new this time."

"And you're very sensible too, Bessie. I wouldn't get nothing if I was you, because you'll look quite as well in linsey as the rest of 'em in silk and satin. But, you know, if you had to pick, what should you get?"

"Well, folks says most colours suits me, and I don't know but what they're right. Maybe if I did get one at all, I'd have lilac, it's a colour as stands well and washes as good as new. But I

mustn't stop talking this way. Miss Hepzibah'll be fine and vexed if I'm late with the bread, and I don't want to anger her now that she's been so good to me. Good morning, Roy. I'm going to be in my old spotted blue print at the wedding, and if you're ashamed of it, you mustn't stand up with me, that's all."

And away went Bessie down the village, the sunlight sparkling on her wavy hair, the morning breeze stirring a rich colour in her round cheeks. Roy looked after her and then walked slowly home, feeling very happy and very perplexed; happy, because he was going to give Bessie an unexpected pleasure; perplexed, because he had no idea of the price of lilac muslin, nor how many yards would be required to make a dress.

But love is proverbial for its ingenuity. When the Duke's foreman got home to his breakfast, old Mrs. Royland was washing out the white curtain which usually hung across the three lower panes of the front kitchen window. Roy had a certain manly pride in being ignorant of household matters; however, this morning, for reasons best known to himself, he manifested unusual interest in his mother's performances.

"It's nigh wore out, is that there, I reckon," said he, as the old woman bent over the wash-tub, drawing the muslin through her lean, wrinkled hands, and then shaking it out so as to send a shower of tiny drops into his face. "It isn't many more times you'll have a chance to put it up, mother."

"Ay, lad, you're in the right. It's seen its best days, like your father and me. It's time it were put out o' t' road to mak room for summut better." And old Mrs. Royland sighed. Chronic liver complaint is such a sad thing for depressing the spirits.

"Nay, nay, mother, now you're not going to talk like that. There's many a good year for you yet. And you'll settle afresh, and get a new lease o' life when you've a daughter to look after you. She'll do lots o' things for you, will Bessie, when we've got fixed up yonder."

And Roy looked away through the kitchen window to a red brick gable end peering up above the willow trees that skirted the Mill-slip. As he looked there came a smile upon his face, which said as plainly as any words could speak—

“There is my house and portion fair,
My treasure and my heart are there,
And my abiding home.”

No, no, Roy, you must take away that last line. The end cottage by the Mill-slip, with its pretty little front parlour, and its newly-dug garden where roses and lilies are to bloom next summer, will never be your abiding home. You and Bessie will never sit hand in hand by its warm fireside, or pluck a single blossom from the geraniums which are even now pushing out their young leaves in the sunshine.

But Roy did not know that, and so the smile kept deepening on his face.

Old Mrs. Royland looked at him with all a mother's pride as he stood there by the window in his grey blouse—Roy never went backwards and forwards in his shirt sleeves now—the collar turned loosely down from the well-shaped throat, the light curls glancing in the beams of sunlight that stole through the rose-bushes in the window. She loved her boy very dearly. And though a sudden cramp of pain had vexed her when first she knew his heart was not all her own, still that is

a pain which must come sooner or later to every mother; and those are wisest who bear it silently, as Mrs. Royland bore it.

“Yes. I don’t misdoubt but what she’ll mak’ thee a good wife when she’s got a bit of the folly wore off. Some folks says she’s over fond o’ dress. I don’t know as there’s much in it myself, though. Many a girl thinks o’ nothin’ else afore she weds, only how she can trick herself out to catch the men; but when she’s fixed wi’ a husband, and bairns’ hands starts cuddlin’ round her neck, and bairns’ bonnie faces looks up intil her own, she finds her heart, and comes out a rare woman after all. Yes, she’ll do, will Bessie. But, lad, it isn’t a new daughter as’ll mak’ me settle afresh. We mun be looking out for a settlement i’ the church-yard, mun your father and me. I reckon we’ll never get no other now. Old folks is best shifted out o’ t’ way.”

Mrs. Royland, being much affected with this mournful prospect, felt inside the bosom of her gown for the cotton pocket-handkerchief which she usually carried there. In doing so she let the muslin blind fall. Roy picked it up, and perhaps thinking that his mother would be better for a

change in the current of her thoughts, went back to the original subject.

“It is wore out, though. I reckon I must buy a bit o’ new next time I go to St. Olave’s. We’re like to be neat afore the wedding. Mother, what would a new ‘un cost ?”

“Why, not a deal for them as has the money to spare. Maybe a matter of sixpence, a penny more or a penny less, I can’t say exact.”

“Yes, but, mother, I mean a real nice ‘un, with sprigs, you know, or little spots all over, same as the young ladies makes dresses on.”

“Mercy on us !” and Mrs. Royland, quite forgetful now of churchyard settlements, lifted up her hands from the tub. “It’s a good thing you axed me. Why, folks as had any sense ’ud never go to cut up dress muslin for windy curtains. Your father and me ’ud be i’ prison in no time that rate.”

“Would you, mother? Does that sort cost such a deal ?”

“It’s a deal for folks like us, as has to scrat hard to get a decent rag to our backs, or addle the bite an’ sup reg’lar. The constable’s wife telled me she give eightpence a yard for a muslin frock for

the wedding. But then Brayson gets good wage, let alone bein' constable, and eightpence a yard isn't over much for his missis to give, if she's a mind to it."

"No, mother, it isn't a deal," said Roy, thoughtfully, "if it didn't take a many yards. *Did* it take a many yards, mother?"

"You'll soon find out, lad, when you get a wife. I'se warrant Bessie 'll let you know afore long how many yards it takes to make a frock. Mrs. Brayson said she got a matter of ten, but she's such a big 'un. A little slip of a thing like yon young miss at the Aspens, 'ud get one wi' a couple o' yards less."

"Eighty pence is six-and-eightpence."

"Ay! That were it when I was a girl; six big silver shillings, to say nowt o' copper. It's well for folks as is constable wives to spend all that over wedding stuff, but I'd look at six-an'-eightpence a good bit afore I slattered it away for a spotted muslin frock, as, when you've got it, it's fit for nowt but merrymaking, and goodness knows there's little enough o' that i' this here world."

Roy did not pursue the argument, but went to the little round table where his coffee was waiting

for him. As soon as Mrs. Royland's back was turned, he made a note of the figures in his pocket-book; ten yards at eightpence a yard. Bessie was not quite so big as the constable's wife, still a yard or two of stuff was always useful, he might as well get a full quantity. Ten yards at eightpence a yard. There, he had a clear course before him now.

The very next Saturday afternoon—since the new steward's arrival the Duke's yard had always closed at two on Saturday afternoons—Roy dressed himself in his second-best suit, and set off to St. Olave's to buy a lilac muslin dress for Bessie Ashton. He walked up and down the High Street many times, but saw nothing that would suit him. There were silks of all the colours of the rainbow, gauzes spangled with gold and silver such as a duchess might wear, ready-made dresses spread out upon lay figures, muslin dresses sprinkled over with roses and lilies and apple-blossom, and others of stainless white with very suggestive wreaths of orange-flower laid upon them beneath veils of filmy lace, orange-flower wreaths which made Roy think with a thrill of hope of that day, sometime about September, or,

may be, a little bit later, when he should bring Bessie home to the cottage by the Mill-slip, and they should be so happy together. And then he wondered if any of those perfumed marriage garlands would be twined amongst curls brighter than hers, or lie upon a forehead so smooth; and if those folds of stainless white would be gathered over a heart which beat more truly than Bessie's did for him.

Roy thought not, and I believe, on the whole, he was right.

Then he turned into the market-place, where the country folks generally went to buy their Sunday finery. There were plenty of smart things in the market-place; prints, with great staring patterns upon them, ribbons pink and blue and red and yellow, scarlet neckerchiefs hanging in long festoons from the top windows quite away down to the ground, and beds of artificial flowers that put nature's dyes to the blush. But no lilac muslin, until he came to a quiet, respectable-looking shop at the corner, kept by two quakers. And there, in the window, marked eightpence a yard, was the very thing he wanted; a pretty purple shade, just the colour of the Canterbury

bells in old Ben Royland's garden, and covered all over with little white spots.

“Ten yards of that,” said Roy, going into the shop, with his purse in his hand, that the master might see he could pay ready money. And then he got as much white ribbon as he thought would make a bow, the constable's wife said everybody would have white bows for the wedding. And last, a piece of stuff for a window-blind.

“Anything in gloves or collars to-day?” said the ready shopman, “got some charming things down from London only last week. Elegant, this now, for a lady's wear, very cheap, too, at a shilling and a penny,” and the man held up a tiny embroidered collar, a “perfect love,” as the young ladies say.

Only a shilling and a penny. A few hours of extra work in the Duke's yard would pay for it, and it would look so pretty round Bessie's white throat. Yes, the man might put it along with the other things. And then Roy, happy as a prince, took his parcel, and set off home.

I wish you could have seen him as he walked along that quiet country road, erect, king-like as any king that ever wore a crown ; his head, with

its coronal of curling light hair, held proudly up, such a frank, honest smile upon his face. You had only to toss away that glazed canvas cap, and exchange the loose brown suit for one of west-end workmanship, and then the grandest lady in the land might have stepped side by side with young Roy, and been proud of him too.

And as he goes along, sometimes whistling, sometimes breaking into a low, merry song, he pictures to himself Bessie's face, as she carries the parcel up to her whitewashed attic to-night—for he does not mean to leave it at the Aspens until after dark. Perhaps he thinks, too, how pretty she will look in the lilac muslin dress, and how the white ribbon will set off the rosy colour of her cheeks, and how daintily the little collar will fit round her slender throat, fastened, maybe, with a single moss rose from the garden down by the haling-bank road.

Yes, Bessie Ashton will look very pretty at the wedding. And some one else will think so besides Roy. For only a week ago, Peter Monk had heard from one of the village people what grand doings they were going to have at the wedding, and how there was to be a dance in the evening

for everyone who chose to go to it. And Peter, who, as we have said before, is in a great tailoring establishment at the west-end, has got leave from his employer to come down for two days. Meadowthorpe is his native place, he says, and his parents are very old, and there is no telling what may happen to them any time.

But Roy knows nothing about this, or he would not whistle so merrily down the St. Olave's road.

And so the days crept on, until one red sunrise—*forerunners of tempest these red sunrises*—ushered in the twenty-first of August, a day memorable to two, at least, of the Meadowthorpe people.

CHAPTER XVI.

VER since Gavin Rivers and Janita had stood hand in hand in the moonlight beneath that crumbling old coat of arms, the long cherished thought of his heart had been shaping itself into purpose, and the time was now come for that purpose to be translated into action.

This Janita Raeburn, this little Inverallan girl, was the woman whom he had chosen out of all the world to be his wife, to bring back the long lost sweetness of the old time, to quicken his lonely desolate life into new beauty and freshness. The rarely mingled courage and humility of her disposition had a resistless charm for him. She had power enough to influence, and gentleness enough to soothe and quiet him. She might be wilful and wayward—he wished no faultless monster for his

wife—but far away, below these surface failings, there lay the sweet trust and steadfastness out of which, in time, a right noble character would grow. Yes, life would yield great treasure of rest and beauty to the man who should win Janita Raeburn for his own.

It was pleasant to picture her in that hitherto lonely, loveless home, its guardian angel and his. Pleasant to look beyond a few short months to the time when, returning wearily from his work, that light step should spring to meet him, and when, sitting by his fireside through the long winter evenings, he need but look up to see that glad, bright face, so quick with thought and feeling, so sure a revelation of the loving soul within. And never had these day-dreams been brighter than when, on the afternoon of that twenty-first of August, he left the Duke's yard, where he had been consulting Mr. Andrews about removing the workmen into their new cottages, and took his way down Meadowthorpe to Professor Ruthven's house.

The Professor was out, Bessie Ashton said ; but if Mr. Rivers did not mind waiting he would be home soon ; he was always back to tea at half-past six. Miss Raeburn was in the drawing-room.

Should she tell her, or would Mr. Rivers prefer waiting in the library for a few minutes?

Mr. Rivers did not prefer waiting in the library, he would go into the drawing-room. Miss Raeburn was alone. It happened to be one of Miss Hepzibah's very busy days; not a cooking day, though, or a preserving day, or a pickling day. If you are particularly wishful to know the nature of her employment, I may as well tell you, that she was in the spare attic, pulling to pieces her best feather bed, a more trying operation, at any rate more absorbing, than the unripping of moreen petticoats.

That feather bed was a great load upon Miss Hepzibah's mind. It was stuffed to repletion with the very best down that could be grown in the United Kingdom—so good, indeed, that Miss Hepzibah could not trust it out of her sight for needful cleaning. If she sent it to the shop at St. Olave's, ten to one but the unprincipled people, unable to resist so strong a temptation, would filch its precious contents, and replace them with plebeian rubbish from the backs of low-bred barn-door poultry. If she gave it to Bessie Ashton or Abigail Snarey or even the village charwoman, who cleaned beds

for thirteen-pence a day, beer included, the lumps would not be properly teased out, and half the down would drift through the window or up the chimney. There remained then but one alternative. She must do it herself. Accordingly, if you had gone up into the top spare attic of the Aspens, on the evening of the twenty-first of August, you would have seen Professor Ruthven's maiden sister sitting on a low stool in the middle of the room, a white apron enveloping her lank person from the waist downward, a dimity bed-gown round her shoulders, a second apron, tufted with little bits of down, tied over her head, and her face clothed with an expression anything but amiable. On the whole, not a pleasant picture.

Not nearly so pleasant as you might have seen down below in the drawing-room. For there Janita, in her pink frock, was kneeling on the floor in front of a great newspaper full of ferns, which she had gathered from the chinks of the old wall on the St. Olave's road. And as she sorted them over, and planted them one by one in her little home-made fern case, she kept whistling to herself, a way she had learned at Inveralan Manse from Agnes Home.

Do not be shocked or startled. There was nothing "fast" in Janita's whistle, nothing to remind you of those detestable women who smoke and carry canes and talk slang. It was just a low merry little trill, like the musical pipe of a young canary that is beginning to sing. So like it indeed, that Bessie's bird in his cage outside the window, kept joining in as if to try which could do the best. And every now and then Janita would stop her whistling and break into a laugh, as Master Dick completely overpowered her with a grand roulade of shakes and turns and flourishes.

So fresh and girl-like, she made you forget the old-fashioned room with its dingy carpet, its faded brocatelle curtains, its seedy furniture and tarnished remains of former gilding. She looked just like that bright flower-laden garden of old Ben Royland's, set as a gem in the midst of the cold grey landscape around. And when she was neither laughing nor whistling, a quiet smile lay upon her face, the blossoming of some sweet thought within, that made her cheek flush and the red lips part until you could see the little teeth gleaming through them.

What that thought was, I know not. Perhaps

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it might be the memory of a boating excursion down Meadowthorpe dyke. Or perhaps it might be a favourable notice of her new story by one of the leading critics of the day. Or perhaps she might be thinking of her walk down St. Olave's road that morning, when she had met Gavin Rivers, and he had helped her to gather those ferns. I think it was most likely the walk. It must have been something very pleasant at any rate, to wake a smile so bright.

The twenty-first of August. Twelve months to-night since she came to live at Meadowthorpe. And she had cried so that night, and she had been so unhappy, and it had seemed such a long long weary time to wait until the next twenty-first of August, when, if she did not feel as if she could settle at the Aspens, she was to go back again into Scotland and stay there always.

And would you like to go back into Scotland now, Janita ? You know you may if you wish it. Kind Mrs. Home would be a mother to you ; the Doctor would welcome his little lassie again with a smile and a kiss ; Agnes would be so glad to have sister Nyta back once more. And for Willie ? The fair-haired Scotch laddie is even now thinking

of the time when you will be much more than a sister to him. Will you go back, Janita, and live quietly in some far off Highland manse, away from this bustling weary world; Willie's face your sunshine, Willie's children calling you mother? Will you go, Janita?

Suddenly the whistling stopped. Some one had come behind her, unheard, and laid his hand upon her mouth.

The hand belonged to Gavin Rivers. Janita could tell that directly by its touch, for Gavin's hands were hardened with much rowing and digging, and other manual labour by which he worked off the overplus energy of his nature. Not at all such hands as Longden Narrowby's, whose palms were soft and velvet-like as any which clasp ladies' fingers in ball-rooms.

"I did not know that whistling was one of your favourite accomplishments, Miss Janita."

"Oh! I don't whistle very often, only when I am alone, and then it is a sort of companionship. Besides, there is no harm in it, is there?"

"Not a bit. The only accusation I have ever heard against it, is that it puts people's mouths out of shape, and it does not appear to have

had that effect upon yours yet. May I help you with these ferns until your uncle comes in?"

Gavin seated himself on a low chair at her side, and whilst apparently sorting the delicate plants, studied Janita's face, which was often uplifted to his, as he told her of the beautiful ferns in South America, those glorious tree ferns whose giant fronds fatten on the humid warmth of tropic forests. Speaking of these things led him on to other boyish memories—to the voyage home, the becalmed vessel with lightnings quivering round its tall masts, and idle waves lapping at its sides, and Nurse Ilsie standing on deck, holding a little baby in her arms, that the English clergyman might sign the holy cross on that unconscious brow which had already received a mother's baptism of tears. That was all over now, a worn-out memory, nothing more. But had the glamour passed away with which Nurse Ilsie said he charmed the little child? Or was it a foreshadowing of that other glamour, brighter and more lasting, which should rule her whole life?

The words were all but spoken which should have bidden her to his heart, to find rest there for ever. She would have come to him at that bid-

ding, and none would have parted them again. Just then there was a gentle tap at the door, and Longden Narrowby entered.

It was about the time of his afternoon visits. He came in with the easy, self-possessed air of a man who feels himself quite at home, and as he sat down in his usual place near the window, he took out of his pocket a volume of poetry, saying that if she was at liberty, he would continue the reading of the poem which Miss Raeburn had enjoyed so much only a few evenings before.

Gavin Rivers did not stay very long after that. When he rose to go away, Janita went with him to the garden-door.

"I am afraid," he said, "I have interrupted your reading this afternoon."

"Oh! no, you have not. I am quite sure you have not," Janita replied in her eager, impetuous way. "And will you not wait for my uncle? I don't think he will be very long now."

"No, thank you, I will come again, very soon—perhaps to-morrow, if you—that is, if the Professor will be at home then."

Gavin looked earnestly down into her face, so earnestly that its colour deepened under his gaze.

And it was a true face ; it might flush, but it did not shrink from that clear, steady, searching look. Should he say what he had to say then, holding her hand in a friendly farewell clasp as they two, only they two, stood at the garden-door under the old coat of arms ; the aspen leaves shivering round them, the robins chirping from the apple-tree branches, the reddening sunlight glancing down upon Janita's bended head ? No, he would come again to-morrow. To-morrow, when he could stay a long time, and have her all to himself. He would tell her all then. And with that thought he went away home to Meadowthorpe Hall.

The twenty-first of August was destined to be an eventful day to some one else besides Gavin Rivers and Janita. Scarcely had Longden Narrowby, after chatting and reading poetry for nearly an hour, taken his departure, when the sound of carriage wheels was heard in the quiet village street, and Janita was called into the dining-room to welcome her old friend Willie Home.

He had been summoned unexpectedly to Inverallan. Trouble had visited the peaceful manse home. Agnes, blithe, merry, swift-footed Agnes, last to weary in their moorland rambles, first to

win the mountain top or reach the highest crag of the steep water courses, poor Agnes had met with a sad accident. She was climbing a rugged path in the woods, when a bush to which she clung gave way, and she fell, injuring her spine on the sharp rocks below. It was very uncertain whether she would ever be able to walk again, or even to move from her couch except as she was lifted from it. They had sent for Willie to consult with him about removing to London—where he had been settled for three months—in order that Agnes might have the benefit of superior medical skill. Dr. Home was already inquiring for an assistant to take his parish for half a year. At the end of that time, if Agnes was no better, he would give up the charge entirely, and the family would remain in London.

It was this that brought Willie so unexpectedly to Meadowthorpe. Agnes had sent word that one day would make but little difference, and if he could stay a night at the Aspens it would be so pleasant for her to hear all about dear Nyta from some one who had seen her, and could tell her how she looked, and whether she was happy, and whether the Meadowthorpe people were kind to

her. Agnes hoped they were, for now the prospect of having her back again at Inverallan was gone. There would be no more sunny rambles over the mountain sides, no more days among the heather, no more evenings in that quiet little study. Only, if they did go to London, Nyta could go and see them there, and Willie would be with them too, which would make it nicer still. Yes, Nyta must go to London as soon as ever they were settled there.

So said poor Agnes, always cheery and hopeful. Pain had not had time yet to quench the native gladness of her heart. She did not know how weary life may become before death quiets it for ever.

Willie Home at the Aspens. A few months ago, what joy his visit would have given ! How gaily Janita would have run to meet him, how frank and hearty the kiss which, spite of Miss Hepzibah's admonitions, and the Guide to Female Excellence, she would have pressed upon his honest, good-tempered face ! It was pleasant even now, though new hopes and new joys had grown up between her and the old Inverallan life. There were so many things to hear, so many questions to

ask, so many messages to send to all the dear people. And how was Nurse Ilsie, and cross old Jamie Ross, the precentor, who used to look so black at them when they were little children, and behaved badly in the minister's pew? And was the manse just as it used to be, and the garden, and the walk under the fir-trees along by the plantation side? And did they often talk about her, and did they remember her as she remembered them? All which questions Willie answered very satisfactorily. And as he answered them, there was a smile upon his face, from which the thought of poor Agnes, lying helpless and suffering, had not robbed quite all its brightness.

Willie Home was very much improved. His boyish, young-student-like air had passed away. He had donned the clerical garb, which gave him manliness and importance. Contact, too, with London society had rubbed off much of his former awkwardness, and smoothed away the roughness of his Scottish speech. And though, perhaps, his face was somewhat too round and ruddy to be called handsome, still there was genial good-nature beaming from every feature of it, which promised much to anyone whose happiness should depend upon him.

The Professor did not make his appearance again after Longden Narrowby's departure. He was engaged with a problem, which, like his sister's jellies when they reached boiling point, was too important to be neglected. But when Miss Hepzibah heard of Willie's arrival, she dressed herself and came down into the drawing-room, leaving the feather-bed to Providence. She did not think it was proper for young people to be left too much alone. When she was a girl, her mother never allowed her to receive the visits of gentlemen without suitable female superintendence. And though Janita talked about "brother Willie," still brother Willie might be hankering after a different sort of relationship—in fact, she believed he was, from the way he blushed when she, Miss Hepzibah, went into the room to be introduced to him. If not, why should he be loitering there seven miles out of his way, when the ties of duty and affection bound him to make all haste to Inverallan and see after his poor sister, who would, perhaps, never leave her room again ? Oh, no, Miss Hepzibah could see well enough what brought the young man to Meadowthorpe ; and as she had no intention whatever of allowing her niece to be beguiled

away again into Scotland if she could prevent it,—a shiftless place, where girls were never taught preserving, or jelly-making, or female propriety, or anything else that was useful,—Miss Hepzibah took her knitting and fixed herself down in her own chair by the drawing-room window, determined to remain there to the very last, until the good-nights were said and young Mr. Home had settled what train he would leave by in the morning. A determination which, like many others equally good, had to be broken at last.

So there they all sat, Miss Hepzibah looking at her stocking with one eye and with the other at the young couple, who were talking at the further side of the room. Poor Willie fidgeted, played with the curtains, asked Janita if she were in the habit of taking a walk in an evening, to which Miss Hepzibah replied promptly that her niece never did anything of the sort, evening walks were very imprudent, especially in a place like Meadowthorpe, where the damps rose so towards sunset—then inquired what time the morning service began at St. Olave's cathedral, he should so enjoy hearing the music and going over the building, which he had heard was very beautiful.

Would not Janita like to go over it too?—he supposed the vergers would scarcely care to take a single person round. Which questions the impracticable Miss Hepzibah again took upon herself to answer, and said that Janita was generally engaged with domestic employments during the time of morning service at St. Olave's, but she had no doubt the Professor would have great pleasure in going over the cathedral with him; or if the Professor was too much occupied, she would make an effort herself and drive him down after breakfast in time to go round the building before the north train started. At last poor Willie gave up in despair, and contented himself with looking silently at Janita, and offering an inward petition that Miss Hepzibah might be sent for out of the room.

In the course of the evening his petition was answered. Mrs. Cloudie came to beg a piece of flannel for her rheumatic ankles. Miss Hepzibah produced a huge bunch of keys and desired her niece to go upstairs and fetch a bundle of the needful material, which she would find lying side by side with several other bundles—all of which Miss Hepzibah described minutely—at the left hand corner of the top long drawer but one in the

great walnut chest that stood between the linen press and the blanket cupboard, under the middle window of the large spare attic.

Janita went duly to the left hand corner, &c., but returned empty-handed, no such bundle could she find. Whereupon Miss Hepzibah looked very black at Willie Home, and asked if he would not like to join the Professor in his study; and then she went up to the attic herself, where there were so many bundles to open, and such a variety of pieces to select from, and such difficulty in getting the drawer to lock, that though the good lady was terribly anxious to be back again in the drawing-room, and though she was quite sure, from the way in which her bones ached, that something amiss was going on there, still full twenty minutes had passed before she was settled down again with her knitting in the high-backed chair by the window. During which twenty minutes Willie Home and Janita Raeburn had been sitting all alone by themselves, with no one to look after them or see that they did not get into mischief.

There is no need to chronicle the events of that brief interval, though many a one more brief has fixed the destiny of a human life. Enough that

when Willie Home wished the Professor good night, about half an hour later, he expressed his intention of going north by the earliest train next morning, instead of staying until noon and being driven over to St. Olave's to look through the Cathedral. He should greatly have enjoyed hearing the music, but, on the whole, he thought it would be advisable to hasten his journey to Inverallan, especially as his sister's health was such as to cause them considerable anxiety. And when, unmindful of sundry nods and jerks and frowns from Miss Hepzibah, the Professor asked if young Mr. Home would look in upon them on his return from Scotland, Willie replied that he should in all probability make the journey by water, and so not pass through St. Olave's at all.

He did set off next morning by the early train, which reached Inverallan before night. And when he got home, he told them that Janita was looking very well and very happy, and that she seemed to like Meadowthorpe very much, and to have found many kind friends. She had sent her love to them all, but did not say anything about coming to see them just at present. Moreover, when, a few days afterwards, it was settled that the whole

family should move to London, Willie suggested that it would be so much better to go by water; that the sea air would do Agnes a world of good; he was quite sure the sickness, even if she felt it, which was uncertain, would be far less injurious than the long, jolting, fatiguing ride in those close railway carriages. So they went by water.

That was all he told them. No one ever knew, not even his mother or Agnes, that Willie's dream castle had come to the ground during the twenty minutes that Miss Hepzibah Ruthven was looking over her bundles, to find a bit of flannel for poor Mrs. Cloudie's rheumatic ankles. Willie was wise. He kept his disappointment to himself.

It grieved Janita to lose her old playmate and companion, to call up even a passing shade of sorrow on that sunny, genial face of his. But something told her that the shadow would pass away before long, that no grief would sink too deeply into that yielding, elastic nature. So she said farewell to the Inverallan home. Another path lay before her. Whether it led to joy or grief, she knew not; only this she knew, that she must go forward—always forward.

CHAPTER XVII.



AVIN RIVERS went home, bearing in his heart the memory of Janita, as she stood at the Professor's door, holding his hand, looking straight into his face with those clear, bright eyes of hers. When he got back to the Hall, Noelline was lying on the sofa in the great drawing-room. She took no notice of his entrance, except to glance keenly at him from beneath her long eyelashes, a glance which, as the sofa was in a dark corner of the room, he did not perceive. He stretched himself at full length on the low cushioned seat of the oriel window, and looked out into the Hall garden, where the shadows of early evening had already begun to dim the bright red clusters of geraniums that grew round the fountain pond, and the gay-coloured ribbon-borders that

outlined the flower-beds. There was silence in the room, except for the musical chime of a time-piece that stood on an alabaster bracket between the mirrors, rolling out a peal of little bells as the quarters passed.

"You have been at the Aspens this evening," said Noelline, when they had been sitting in silence for nearly an hour.

"Yes, I have."

"I was sorry you did not tell me you were going. I would have asked you to take a message for me to Janita."

"I will take it for you to-morrow, then. I intend to be there again to-morrow."

"At the Aspens again? Well, I only wanted to ask Janita to come to tea next Monday, in a very quiet way. You know Elene Somers is coming this evening to stay with me until my marriage, and I promised Longden Narrowby he should meet Miss Raeburn here whilst she was with us. As things are, it is only kind to ask them together now and then. I believe Monday is one of his spare evenings. It is Monday he generally goes in to the Aspens."

Gavin Rivers said nothing. Neither did his

sister for some time. She lay still, with shut eyes, only an occasional contraction of the clearly arched brows showing that she was not asleep. When next she spoke, it was in a very calm, low tone.

“Gavin, dear.”

“Well.”

“I think you are scarcely acting kindly or honourably just now.”

“I not acting kindly, not honourably!” and Gavin Rivers drew himself up. “How? To whom? When did I ever act dishonourably to any one?”

“I don't think you ever did, intentionally. But I am afraid young Mr. Narrowby will feel annoyed by these frequent visits of yours to the Aspens.”

“And pray what has young Narrowby to do with my visiting the Professor? May I not go to the Aspens when I please without consulting him? I am not aware that Longden Narrowby has the right to interfere with any of my movements.”

And as Gavin said this, his eyes began to kindle as they only did when he was on the verge of passion. But Noelline's voice never changed, nothing ever stirred her into passion.



"No, Gavin. I am sure you were not aware of it, and that is the reason I wished to caution you."

"Caution me, about what?"

"About being too marked in your attentions to Miss Raeburn. As I said before, it is scarcely honourable, under present circumstances."

"Noelline, what *do* you mean? Speak out."

"I wish you would not be so easily provoked, Gavin. I am sure I say it in all kindness, and not with any desire to wound you."

"But you have said nothing yet; nothing at least except these inuendoes which I cannot understand."

"That is not my fault. I thought you *would* understand them. I will tell you plainly then. Janita is engaged to Longden Narrowby."

Noelline spoke the words slowly and deliberately, stroking her golden ringlets all the time with those jewelled fingers, and looking steadily at her brother, who was walking rapidly now up and down the room, just as he always did when anything vexed him. It was vexing to hear these idle reports about Janita Raeburn. But they were only idle reports. He was sure they were only idle reports.

“Janita engaged to Longden Narrowby! Noel-line, the thing is simply impossible. How can you retail such village gossip?”

“Village gossip generally has foundation. I believe you will find I am correct.”

“It is not true. I will ask the child myself. She will tell me.”

But Miss Rivers had no intention that her brother should do anything of that sort. She said with a careless smile,

“Gavin, how can you be so ridiculous? The idea of asking Janita such a question. Of course she will deny it. Young ladies always deny such things. But if you are particularly anxious to know my authority, I will give it you. Mrs. Narrowby told me herself.”

“Noelline, she cannot care for him. If she did, how could she—how dare she allow me to——”

“I do not know what she has allowed you to do, Gavin. I have thought for some time that her manners are very free and unrestrained. I must say that if I had been in young Narrowby’s place, I should have felt very much annoyed by them.”

“And so should I,” muttered Gavin, bitterly.

“Yes, I am sure you would. And if the girl

has been trifling with you, and just amusing herself by making you believe that she entertained a preference for you, I can only say I am astonished at her want of womanliness."

Noelline knew she had touched the right strings; first, her brother's honour, then his pride. That he should have trespassed upon the rights of another man, that he should have been made the sport of a young girl's idle flirtations, either of these things would sting him through and through. She went on, quietly as ever :

" But I simply repeat to you what Mrs. Narrowby has told me, that Miss Raeburn is engaged to her son. And also that the marriage has her perfect sanction. She thinks they are so admirably suited to each other. And indeed you know they are perfectly matched as to age, no disparity at all. The girl, too, is a nice little creature in her way, so very simple and unaffected. Certainly there is a sort of charm about her; she is perfectly fascinating sometimes, so bright and girlish and frank."

" There, there, Noelline. For goodness sake do be still. You know how I hate gossip. You have told me quite enough."

Gavin threw open one of the casements and leaped out into the garden. There Noelline heard him crushing the gravel under his feet as with impatient strides he traversed the laurel walk for more than an hour, until early autumn twilight had wrapped the garden in shadow, and not a flower could be seen anywhere, and only the outlines of the great laurel-trees could be traced upon the grey darkening sky.

"So far, so good," murmured Noelline, her lovely lips parting into a smile as she listened to that quick impetuous tread. Gavin always walked in that way when he was angry. Not grieved nor sorrowful. Then he would sit still for hours with closed eyes and folded hands, speaking no word, making no sign. It was only when he was angry, when something had galled and irritated him, that he crushed out his vexation in those hasty tramping footsteps. It was far better to hear those footsteps now than to see him sitting with shut eyes and folded hands, absorbed in melancholy thought. The angry mood would fall in with her plans. Not so the thoughtful one.

But just then the roll of carriage wheels was heard at the great entrance. Elene Somers had

come to stay with "dear Miss Rivers," and help her with those little niceties of wedding preparation which could not be trusted to hirelings.

Noelline went into the hall to meet her, and the two ladies were soon seated hand in hand in the silken-curtained boudoir, talking oversundry matters connected with the bridal costume : whether Honiton or Brussels would be most elegant for the veil, whether the wreath should be of lotos or orange blossom, how many flowers there should be on the wedding-dress, and in what order the bridemaids should walk up that musty little church, where Destiny Smith was even now practising his choir in the marriage anthem.

CHAPTER XVIII.



GAVIN RIVERS might stride up and down that laurel walk in the Hall garden as long and as furiously as he pleased, but he would never be able to crush down the torrent of angry bitterness that was surging up in his heart. And not only bitterness but humiliation. He had been made the sport of a girl's idle caprice. He had been beguiled into laying the whole wealth of his love and trust at the feet of one who had nothing to give him in return, who had only won these from him to thrust them back with contempt. She had talked to him,—long, sweet, pleasant talks, whose memory clung about him still; she had suffered her hand to lie in his, his kiss to rest upon her forehead, and all the time she belonged to another. He had been wasting his affections on a casket from which the jewel was gone.

He had been deceived, made sport of. His pride was hurt, and hurt pride is often harder to bear than deeply wounded love. Then he thought of her, so gay, so fascinating, so child-like, so false. Yes, Janita Raeburn was false. The ugly word belonged to her now, she could never shake it off. How blind and foolish he had been not to find it out before. He remembered the easy, confident, self-possessed air with which Longden Narrowby had entered the room that afternoon, the air of a man who has often been there and feels he has a right to go. He remembered the perfectly unembarrassed way in which the young man had told Janita that he had come to finish the poem which she had enjoyed so much an evening or two ago. Yes, no doubt she had enjoyed it very much, and many a one before it, too. Then he pictured them sitting together in that drawing-room at the Aspens, Longden in the great easy-chair—which was evidently his regular place—she on a footstool at his side, looking up into his face now and then with a bright, quick smile, such a smile as she wore that night, not very long ago, when they rowed together down Meadowthorpe dyke, he thinking the smile was for him.

Foolish fellow ! Yes, that was just the sting of it. To feel that he, the steward of Meadowthorpe, a man of years and position and character, had made a simpleton of himself for the sake of a little girl who had been amusing her idle hours by drawing him out, perhaps talking about him to Longden Narrowby. It was galling. It made him feel as if he could like to throw off the whole concern and go back to the place in Devon, which, if it held some bitter memories, had none so humiliating as those he had earned for himself at Meadowthorpe.

Now he could see the meaning of many things. That evening, when Longden Narrowby and Janita took tea at the Hall with Elene Somers, how Noelline had thrown them into each other's company; how she had so arranged that they should walk home together, that he should sit by her side at supper. And that he should sing with her. Ah ! it was no wonder they should sing so sweetly together, that their voices should be made for each other. Doubtless those songs had often been practised, with due turning over of leaves and whispering of compliments and exchanging of meaning looks and the other performances

which attend mutual practisings between “members of the opposite sex,” as Miss Hepzibah called them. And then those sketching engagements. The perfect coolness with which Janita had told him that young Narrowby had offered to give her “a few lessons in sketching from nature.” Sketching from nature, indeed ! Flirtation and duplicity appeared to be the only lessons she had learned. And he thought she was so simple, so girlish, so pure from all the wiles and guiles of young ladyhood !

Gavin Rivers crushed the gravel beneath his feet more impatiently than ever, less for sorrow at Janita’s deceitfulness than for indignation that he should have been ensnared by it.

He was still walking up and down when a servant came to announce tea.

“ In the library, if you please, Sir,” said the obsequious footman, as his master was turning into the gloomy, deserted dining-room ; “ Miss Rivers ordered a fire to be lighted and tea served in the library this evening. She was afraid you would find the dining-room chill after being so long in the open air.”

Gavin sighed. He had often been hasty and

impatient with poor Noelline, yet she took thought for his comfort, which was more than some others did.

He went into the library, where warm red fire-light was glancing on the glazed bookcases, and on the crested silver tea service, behind which Noelline sat, all smiles and animation. Elene Somers was there too, blandly amiable, as was her wont.

Turning from the thoughts that vexed him so, to gaze upon her serene beauty, to watch her leisurely tranquil ways, was like plunging out of the heat of summer into cool waters. It quieted and subdued him. He was quivering all over with wounded pride, stung through with bitter humiliation. She met him with a sweet courtesy which healed the one and soothed the other. He was in one of his angry moods, she was bland and gentle. He was imperious and exacting, she yielding and submissive. If the Dean's blue-eyed daughter had had the wisdom of Solomon, she could not have managed Gavin Rivers better, or won him more effectually than by that placid amiability of hers.

Noelline understood her brother well in some

respects, though there were heights and depths in his nature which one like her own could never comprehend. She knew how, roused to passion by what he deemed the caprice of a vain girl, he would fall more readily into the snare she had laid for him. She knew how Elene's tranquil beauty, her calm, regal ways, her dignified self-possession, would charm Gavin by their very contrast with the impulsive eagerness of Janita Raeburn,—Janita, who had slighted and deceived him. That was why she had invited Miss Somers to come to the Hall at this time, that, immediately upon the discovery of what he supposed to be his little favourite's guileful flirtation, and whilst still in the first bitterness of prejudice against anything that might remind him of her, he should be confronted with Elene's perfectly opposite style of loveliness, a loveliness which would charm him more from its very contrast to that which had betrayed him so.

And Gavin Rivers did fall into the snare. If Miss Somers had been piquant and lively, she would have worried him beyond endurance. If she had been thoughtful and intellectual, she would have driven him out of patience. If she had been gay and girlish, like Janita, he would have

hated her. But being as she was, simply amiable, she fascinated him completely. And Noelline managed everything so admirably, too. Of course that message was never sent to the Aspens. Miss Raeburn never came to spend any more "quiet evenings" at the Hall. But Longden did. And Noelline contrived, during her conversation with him, in her brother's presence, to bring out still more palpably the fact of his intimacy with the Professor's charming little niece, a fact which Longden, as before, was at no pains to deny. And she referred so artfully, yet with such apparent unconsciousness, to his frequent visits, the books he had read with Janita, the designs he had shown to her, the sketches they had made together, that any lingering doubts which remained on Gavin's mind were quite dispelled. If Miss Raeburn was not engaged to Longden Narrowby, she had been flirting desperately with him, and that, to a man of Gavin's sensitive tastes, was as bad or even worse.

Then there were two or three pleasant little evening parties at the Hall during Elene's stay—farewell entertainments, as Noelline said, to a few of the dear Meadowthorpe friends who had been

so kind to her. But in reality, the dear friends were only invited to serve as a foil to Elene's surpassing loveliness. The fair-haired St. Olave's beauty moved supreme amongst the lesser village lights, outshining the pale, property-stricken, washed-out Misses Narrowby, the piquant Miss Graham, and the aristocratic but penniless Aubrey House ladies, as the full moon overpowers the twinkling stars of night.

Besides the quadrille and charade parties, there were boating excursions, where Noelline arranged that Elene should steer and Gavin should be first oarsman, so that, as they glided down the sleepy stream of Meadowthorpe dyke, he could study at leisure her statuesque face, and listen without an effort to the sweet tones of her voice, which was never eager or wayward or petulant, like Janita's. And there were pic-nics into the Norland woods, and gatherings for croquet playing in the Hall field, and archery meetings on Meadowthorpe stray. In all of which, Miss Somers, being his sister's guest, was committed to Gavin's care. "She is to be my head bridesmaid, Gavin, you know."

It was easy to see how things would end.

Gavin Rivers did what many a man has done before him, what many a man will do again. Rudely awakened from his dream of happiness, his ideal palace shattered into ruins, his trust betrayed, his pride wounded, his faith in woman's honour shaken, he rashly offered the poor remains of his affections to the first person who appeared likely to accept them. It was of little consequence who she was that he thus took to his heart and home, so long as he could prove to Janita Raeburn that she had not broken that heart, and that her faithlessness had not spoiled that home.

And so it came to pass that after a few more of these pleasant boating parties, a few more moonlight strolls in the laurel walk, and cosy *tête-à-têtes* in the reddening Norland woods, Gavin Rivers took Elene's arm into his, led her up the richly panelled Hall staircase into the dim little room where Mrs. Rivers sat before her ivory crucifix; and placing the white hand of the Dean's daughter in that which rested on the open volume of Santa Teresa's *Aspirations and Meditations*, said, very calmly—

“Mother, this lady is to be your daughter.”

CHAPTER XIX.

RS. RIVERS received the intimation quietly. It was not her way to make a commotion about anything. Marrying and giving in marriage were subjects on which her thoughts never rested now. Gavin's determination, too, would involve no change in her own life. It had long been arranged between them that in the event of Mr. Rivers marrying, his mother should remain with him, occupying her present isolated position in the household. There was no need, then, for personal anxiety. She looked up from her book and scanned Elene's face for a moment or two.

Elene neither smiled, nor blushed, nor wept. She was always self-possessed, never more so than now. Neither was there any look of triumph in the blue eyes that were half veiled beneath their

full, snowy lids. Miss Somers received the greeting of her future mother-in-law tranquilly, as, an hour ago, she had lifted her forehead for Gavin's troth kiss.

"I am glad for you, my son. May you both be happy."

Then the shadowy, thought-burdened face bent again over the book before it, in which were recorded the wonderful spiritual experiences of the Spanish devotee, and her temptations in the convent cell.

Gavin took this as a sign that they might depart. Once more putting Elene's arm in his, he led her away out of that dim chamber, down the long corridor, and into the pink-curtained boudoir where Noelline Rivers was lounging in her easy chair.

He joined their hands, looked steadily into Noelline's face for a single moment, and then, without another word, left them there together. Whatever else Miss Rivers might have found in that look, she read thus much of its meaning, that Gavin had brought her a new sister. Her plans had succeeded. Her adversary was checkmated at last. There must be no show of triumph though,

as yet. A well-bred chess player speaks quietly enough the fatal word which makes the victory his own. So Noelline returned her brother's look with one in which there was nothing but the tenderest affection. And then she bent her head to hide what might be a quiver of emotion on those clearly chiselled features. For marriage is such a serious thing, such a very serious thing; and a brother's marriage, too.

There was plenty of work waiting for the steward that night in his little office room, the room that opened out of the library. Mr. Andrews had sent in his weekly accounts; there were plans of new cottages to look over, proposed alterations to be considered. Mr. Narrowby's clerk had been waiting a full half hour with estimates of some farm buildings which were to be erected in the lordship, and the decorative painter had been waiting still longer for final orders relative to the fitting up of the great corridor as a ball-room for the wedding night.

But Gavin Rivers was in no mood for work. He dismissed the men, telling them to come again in the morning. Plans, accounts, alterations, esti-

mates—he would attend to them by-and-by. After leaving Elene in Noelline's boudoir he made his way across the garden to the old stone gateway, whose mossy steps led down to Meadowthorpe dyke. The boat was there, moored to a staple in the wall, with rugs and cushions lying in it just as he and his lady love had left them an hour ago. He got in, unfastened the moorings, and let himself drift idly down with the current.

It was a still, pleasant evening. Day lingered, though the sun had set. A few level bars of cloud, purple-grey and crimson, low lying in the western sky, lent a warm glow to the old red gables of the Hall. With a rustling sound, the wind crept round the willow trees, and stirred the tall flag leaves. The yellow iris blossoms nodded amongst the sedge; the forget-me-nots looked up in his face with their loving blue eyes—Elene's eyes were blue and loving too—the brown bulrushes shivered, the reed-grass shook out a cloud of down from its light flowers, as here and there a solitary heron trod them down. And far away over Dykeland marsh the mist was slowly creeping up, the cold, grey mist that always came with early Autumn evening.

Waking at last from a reverie, Gavin Rivers found himself just upon the shelving bank where two months ago he had met Janita with her sketch-book, and he had made her put it away to join him in the boat. Again he seemed to see her as he had seen her then, with her bright quick smile, her eager face, her unschooled girlish gestures, so different from Elene's calm statuesque face. He was not so angry now, not so full of bitter indignation as when Noelline first told him of her falseness. Time had worn away the sting of that disappointment, it had quieted his wounded pride ; it had not taken away his memory though. He could not quite forget her, nor all that they had been to each other, nor all that they might have been. Perhaps he had thought of her harshly, judged her harshly. He should have remembered what a child she was in the ways of the world and its social conventions, how lonely too her life must be there in that quiet old house, with none to love, none to cling to. He might have been more tender to her, he might at least have given her the chance of justifying herself. But it was too late now. It was no use thinking what he might have been, what he might have done. She was going to marry Longden Narrowby, and they would be very

happy together. No doubt they would be very happy together.

But twilight was thickening. With a faint cloyed sound, as if trying to cleave its way through the mist, the church bell struck eight. He must go back to Elene Somers. It was not courteous to leave his betrothed so long. He rowed round to his boat-house on the other side of the farm, and then walked rapidly across the fields to the Hall.

Was he in high spirits? Was he bright and exultant as a man should be who has gained at last some coveted prize; or happy with the calm happiness of one who wins, after long patient waiting, the crowning gift of a true woman's love? He could not tell. He dared not ask. He only knew that he was engaged to be married to a very amiable woman, a woman who would never dazzle him with her intelligence, or outshine him by her brightness, or weary him with the brilliance of her thoughts; a woman who would grace his home and preside with calm majesty at the head of his table, and sustain if not by innate force of character, at least by her wealth and connections, his position in society. He knew, too, that the past was quite past, that a little gleam of brightness had gone out

from his life, that he must not think any more now of that walk across the Square with Janita's arm in his, nor of the two or three minutes when they had stood under the old doorway, and he had stooped down and kissed her. All that sort of thing must be forgotten. He had crossed the Rubicon ; to go back was impossible.

But to return to the pretty doves who are cooing together in their pink-lined nest at the Hall.

You may step in and listen to them if you like. They are not talking secrets or whispering anything confidential as they sit on the couch with arms entwined, Elene's large white fingers playing with the diamond ring on Noelline's left hand, the ring so soon to be replaced by a simpler one. Miss Rivers is only describing the programme of the wedding. She is telling her beautiful sister that is to be, how the company are to arrange themselves, in what order the couples are to enter the church and in what order leave it, how many pair of white gloves must be sent from town, and how many bouquets from the florist at St. Olave's. After that, Noelline goes on to speak of her wedding dresses, and to suggest to Elene how her own *trousseau* should be provided. Miss Rivers having lived much

in Paris and London, has such excellent taste in matters of costume. Elene must have a very handsome black silk dress for travelling, a black silk dress is indispensable, and a cashmere shawl, too—Noelline will choose her a shawl in Paris, for she and Francis are going on the Continent for their bridal tour. And Noelline does so envy Elene the privilege of being married in that beautiful old cathedral; a wedding procession down the nave of St. Olave's cathedral can be arranged so charmingly, so very different you know from anything that can be done in that stupid little bit of a church at Meadowthorpe, where there is scarcely room for two people to walk abreast up the aisle. Indeed Noelline is quite sure the clumsy bolts outside those pew doors will catch at her bridal veil, and Elene is in fear for the bridemaiden's tulle robes, those free seats down the middle of the church are such a nuisance. Would not the rector allow them to be taken up just for one day? She will get her papa to speak to the Bishop about it. And so on. You may listen as long as you please—the pretty doves will say nothing more confidential than you have already heard.

A couple of hours later, the household of Meadow-

thorpe Hall had dispersed for the night. The Dean's daughter, beneath her damask canopies, was dreaming dreams of bridal wreaths and *trousseaux*. Mr. Rivers was walking up and down his bedroom with folded arms and a face not so bright as it might have been.

Gavin must get out of that habit of walking up and down rooms. It is very destructive to the carpets, especially when he walks with such a fierce, determined tread. And it will certainly be a great annoyance to young Mrs. Rivers before long, for she is not accustomed to anything of that kind at home. They are very quiet people at the Deanery; they never walk except out of doors.

Noelline did not go to bed until after the Hall clock had struck twelve. The lamplight quivered upon her golden ringlets as she sat in the great easy chair in her boudoir, with Tip curled into a little round black lump upon her knee.

“Well, Tip.”

And Tip brightened up and winked, and set his head on one side, he did so enjoy a little quiet talk with his mistress.

“Checkmated at last, Tip.”

“Exactly so, my lady.”

CHAPTER XX.



EXT week the Hall carriage was ordered out, and Miss Rivers drove into Meadowthorpe with her mamma, to make a round of farewell calls.

She only left cards at most of the houses. It was such a bore getting out and talking to the people, the Meadowthorpe tribe were so insufferably dull in general conversation. But when they reached the Aspens, Miss Rivers did not leave cards there.

“I wish to get out, mamma, and have a few minutes with Janita. Drive down the St. Olave’s road, Brown, and call for me in half an hour.”

To which command the white-gloved footman touched his hat. Then Miss Rivers was shown into the dingy, old-fashioned drawing-room, where

Janita sat alone, mending some fine muslin for her aunt.

Janita could not tell how it was, but she had seen very little of the Hall people lately. Elene Somers was staying there, and that might be the reason, but the visit of Elene Somers need not have prevented Mr. Rivers from coming in to see them as he used to do. It was three weeks now since he had promised to take her down Meadowthorpe marsh again, to see the sunset over those level fields. Surely the Hall boat must be painted and ready to use again. Mr. Rivers told her himself the man would finish it in ten days. It could not be the boat that he was waiting for. It must be something else besides the boat that kept him away so long. And then Janita recollected that August was the time for making up the half-yearly accounts. The new steward had been at Meadowthorpe six months. He would be making up his books and sending them to the Duke for inspection. That half-yearly balancing of accounts was a troublesome business, she had heard the Professor say so. No doubt the accounts kept Mr. Rivers from coming in to see them; but when they were out of the way, all would be right again.

She hoped he would not forget about that row down Meadowthorpe dyke. She had not forgotten it. The thought of a long quiet talk with Gavin Rivers was very pleasant, very pleasant indeed, enough to brighten many an hour of dull dry-household duty, whatever the Guide to Female Excellence might say about the impropriety of a young lady so far forgetting, &c., &c.

She was perhaps thinking of that when Noel-line Rivers came gliding into the room, breaking its utter silence by her sweet musical tones.

“Ah! Janita, darling! I have been wanting to see you for such a long time. It really seems an age since I had a quiet chat with you. You never come up to the Hall now, you naughty little thing. I do believe you have quite forgotten us. Oh! that is so unkind of you.”

Yes, it was three weeks since she had been at the Hall, and then Miss Rivers had said so much about having her up again very soon to spend another quiet evening. She must go and spend a quiet evening with them when dear Elene came. But dear Elene had been there a fortnight, and the invitation had never been sent. Janita thought if she called at the Hall again, it might

seem like asking for it. So she excused herself as well as she could, by saying that she had had a great deal of work to do. Which was quite true; but it was work in that little attic study of Miss Alwyne's, work which none but just they two knew anything about.

“And,” Noelline continued, “we are always so glad to see you, we think so much of you, you are quite a favourite at the Hall, I assure you. But as you won’t come to see me, I have come to see you, and have a nice little chat with you. It is such a long time since I had a nice little chat with you, is it not, darling? And I have told Brown to take the carriage farther on, and call for me in half an hour. So you must not get tired of me before then. I have such a great deal to tell you.”

“It is very kind of you to come and see me,” said Janita. And when she had said that, she did not know exactly what else to say. She always felt shut up in the presence of the steward’s sister. Talking to Noelline Rivers was just like trying to drink out of one of those false double glasses, which seem as if they were filled with rich red wine bubbling round the brim, but when you try

to drink, not a drop wets your lips, you touch nothing but the cold hard glass. However, she did manage to get out something about the weather, and the harvest, which was nearly over now. And then they had some talk about the canary and the new roses which Miss Hepzibah had got from the Bishop's gardener, and a few other little matters which kept them from being completely stranded, until Noelline entered upon the subject which she had in hand.

“ You know, Janita, dear, I have got one little thing to tell you, and I thought I would come on purpose to tell you it myself, because I do not want anyone else to bring you the news.”

Janita thought it was most likely something connected with the wedding day, and so prepared herself with a suitable greeting. Noelline went on.

“ I daresay you know that I shall not come to see you many more times. Only another fortnight, just one little fortnight.”

“ So soon ? I am very glad for you. I hope you will be very happy.”

“ Thank you. I knew you would congratulate me about it. And, indeed, I think I have every

prospect of a comfortable settlement. You know, being such a friend, I can say so to you. Colonel Gore is in a very good position, and his connections are everything that could be desired. I could wish for nothing more with regard to his connections. And that you know is a very important consideration. I could never marry anyone who was not well connected. But you saw him, did you not? at that little ball we gave soon after we came to the Hall."

"I was not at the ball," said Janita, quietly.

"Not at the ball? Oh! my dear, you are mistaken. We should certainly send you an invitation. Most likely you were engaged, and so you have forgotten it. So have I too, for it is such a long time ago, and I have had so much to think about since. But you do remember that nice chat we had in my boudoir when you came to spend a quiet little evening with us?"

Yes. Janita did remember that, as children remember the taste of bitter medicine even when health has returned.

"And we were talking about my brother, were we not, and I told you I was quite sure he would never marry? You know I did not believe he

was a marrying man. People at his time of life are difficult to please. I really did think he would not marry. But even sisters are mistaken sometimes.

Perhaps Janita thought Miss Rivers had been mistaken too, in supposing that the new steward would never marry. She did not say so, though. There were so many things she could not say to Gavin's sister. And, indeed, Noelline gave her no time to say anything, for she went on with such a pretty rippling smile—

“Yes, even sisters. And I have been mistaken, too. Gavin really is going to be married. Now, is it not strange?”

Noelline had contrived to place the young girl again so that the light fell full upon her face. She looked into that face now, keenly, as keenly as she could well do without appearing to search it too rudely. But for once in her life Janita was strong; though she felt as the little bird may feel when the snake's bright eyes are upon it. Perhaps it might be that very fascination which kept her so still.

“And you would like to know who the lady is. Now, I am quite sure you would like to know who she is, would you not?”



"Oh! yes, please. If you do not mind telling me."

"No, I do not mind telling you, because I know you will be so very much interested in it. I am sure you feel the utmost friendliness towards my brother, and he feels the same towards you. You know, Janita dear, I once had the tiniest little bit of a notion that if ever Gavin *did* marry, he would take a fancy to you. Only, as I told you before, he is not a marrying man—at least, I thought he was not a marrying man."

And Noelline kept on reading Janita's face, noting how, while the lips kept their smile, the bright eyes grew glazed and expressionless, and the colour gradually faded out from the cheeks which were like blush roses only a few minutes before. She might as well make haste and get it said, and put the girl out of her misery.

"But I am talking on and never telling you the lady's name. My brother is going to marry Elene Somers, the Dean's daughter. Now, will it not be a charming match? Are you not glad?"

"Oh, yes! very, very glad indeed."

"Yes. I was sure you would be. They are so admirably suited to each other in age and every-

thing else. You know Elene Somers cannot be less than eight and twenty. And my brother—dear me, how old is my brother?"

"Thirty-four."

"Oh! yes, thirty-four. What a good memory you have, but mine was always wretched. Thirty-four. Well, that is just as it should be, no disparity at all, and I always say that nothing is so ridiculous as disparity, unless people love each other very much; then I suppose a few years on one side or the other do not make much difference. But, generally, disparity is ridiculous, is it not?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it is."

Poor Janita was beginning to feel as if she could not keep this up much longer. And with those searching eyes upon her, too. And with that clear, musical voice, ringing out like a silver bell; every word, every sentence so cruelly distinct.

"Well, I think it is very ridiculous. And as soon as ever I knew how suitably my brother had chosen, I determined to come and tell you myself. It is so very much better for a man to be settled, so very much better. Oh! you quiet little thing! How is it I cannot get you to be excited about it.

You are learning to be as self-possessed as those pasteboard Miss Narrowbys. And I thought you would be so delighted. But I must not stop here talking any longer. I believe I heard the carriage come round some minutes ago. And will you give my love to dear Miss Ruthven, and say how very sorry I am not to see her. I am really quite unfortunate, she is always out when I call at the Aspens, and I have seen so little of her. But you know, Janita dear, I have had so many people to call upon at Meadowthorpe. Poor mamma being such a recluse, the visiting has fallen upon me, and, oh dear! it has been such a bore sometimes. But I always enjoyed a chat with you. And now, good-bye, darling, if I don't see you any more."

And then, giving Janita a kiss, which made the young girl shiver from head to foot, Miss Rivers gathered up her silken flounces, and glided gracefully out of the room. That was the last time she ever called at the Aspens.

The church clock struck four, it struck five, it struck six, but still Janita sat there, her hands tightly clasped as she had clasped them after Noelline's farewell touch, her wide-open, tearless eyes straining out into the garden.

To her dying day that quiet garden picture staid in her memory. The bright-eyed robin, poising itself on an ivy-branch just outside the window, the blackbird swinging to and fro and singing in the old apple tree, the aspen leaves—there had been a burst of sunshine after rain—trembling in the golden light and letting fall with every gust of wind a shower of rainbow-coloured drops. And a butterfly was drying its wings on one of Miss Hepzibah's rose-bushes, and a big brown bee burying itself for drowsy pleasure in the fragrant purple shade of the Canterbury bells that grew by the brick wall.

Janita remembered it all. But not the great sorrow through which she lived in those dreary hours. God in mercy dulled the memory of the sorrow, that, losing, in part, its exceeding bitterness, and retaining only the strength it left behind, she might go forth more worthily to the work he had for her to do in the world, might walk more patiently over the beaten track of duty, sowing as she went many a seed thought, which should bring forth fruit for those who followed after.

CHAPTER XXI.

HEN came the wedding. Oh ! such a grand wedding, as it was, to be sure ! Such prancing and curveting of rosetted steeds before the Hall gates. Such running to and fro of liveried servants, wearing the sunniest of smiles upon their faces, and the whitest of favours in their button holes. Such tying of bouquets and fitting on of gloves, and twining of wreaths, and arranging of vapoury muslin robes. Such marshalling of bridesmaids in the great entrance of the Hall. Such rustling there, of matron brocades and flashing of family diamonds. Such hurrahing, too, from the little boy populace outside, as the carriages rolled out one after another into the St. Olave's road. Every one said there had never been such a wedding from the Hall be-

fore, no, not even when the old steward's daughter was married ; for where was ever a bride so lovely as Noelline Rivers, or a bridegroom so brave as Colonel Gore, or bridemaids so graceful as those who gathered like a group of white cluster roses round their queen-flower that morning ?

Then the village. At least that part of it which reached from the Hall to the church. The magician's wand must have been stretched out there, certainly. When the people went to sleep the night before, Meadowthorpe was just like any other country place, only a little quieter perhaps, for there is always a certain hush of repose before any great event ; lights flickering as usual from the cottage windows, the yellow harvest moon tipping the elm-trees in Meadowthorpe lane, and flickering amongst the flags by the dyke-side ; the roads silent and deserted, save for a stray foot-passenger or two, who might be on his way from Muchmarch to St. Olave's. When they woke next morning the place was all awave with flags and garlands. Pennons fluttered from the trees, arches spanned the road, and evergreen festoons lined all the way from the Hall to the church, festoons looped up with bunches of flowers, the brightest and best

that old Ben Royland's garden could yield. Over the Hall gates was a grand quadruple arch, surmounted with the initials of the bride and groom in dahlias on a background of laurel leaves; and at the church porch another just like it, only that instead of the initials, was Noelline's motto—"True and firm."

Roy had managed well. As soon as the village people were safely out of the way, and wrapped in balmy slumbers, he and his comrades commenced operations. They fixed the poles at equal distances, and hoisted the pennons from the tall elm-trees. The evergreen festoons had been prepared in the timber-shed the day before; the flower mottoes, too, and devices were ready beforehand, stowed away safely in one of the Duke's yard workshops, so that things only wanted putting in their places with a little finishing touch here and there. And each man did his best with such hearty goodwill, that before sunrise drove away the last lingering beams of moonlight, the work was completed, and the village looked like a fairy-scene, "quite mirac'lous," as old Mrs. Cloudie said.

But the prospect inside the church eclipsed everything else. Such a treat as was enjoyed by

the favoured few who were determined enough to press past the beadle and constable and parish officers, and elbow their way into the sacred edifice, there to wait for a full hour until the bridal procession came up. What stretching of necks there was, what perilous mounting of pew seats and even pew tops, as a bustle amongst the liveried servants at the west entrance announced the arrival of the first carriage. Such suppressed gasps of admiration as couple after couple, friends of the bride and groom, came up the crimson-carpeted aisle in dresses the like of which for splendour and style, had never before been seen in that musty little church. Then an interval of breathless suspense, and like a sudden burst of sunshine the bridesmaids came streaming in, followed by the bride herself, glistening in white satin and Honiton lace, orange buds trembling amongst her golden ringlets, pearls and diamonds flashing through the veil that shrouded her like a mist. Oh ! it was a sight to be seen ! And everyone said there never had been such a wedding in Meadowthorpe church, though many a gallant cavalier and royalist maiden had knelt before its altar, and many a Plantagenet baron in mail and cloth of gold plighted his troth there.

As the procession came out, the bells struck up a merry peal, and a double row of children in white frocks scattered flowers at the bride's feet. Miss Rivers had been so very kind to the children, she had gone to the school so often and given them such nice little books, and smiled so sweetly when she met them in the village street. Oh ! they were only too proud to have their flowers trodden upon by those dainty satin-slipped feet, and prouder still, when the company had passed, to press forward and snatch back again a crushed geranium or sullied rose to treasure in remembrance of the bridal day.

Janita watched it all out of the little attic window at Miss Alwyne's. She could see quite away down the road with its garlands and festoons ; she could hear the hurrahing of the people as carriage after carriage passed the Hall gateway, the sunlight shining on the horses' silver-mounted harness and the scarlet caps of the postillions. So near she was that she could almost recognise the faces of the guests as they passed slowly, very slowly, down the churchyard path, amidst bell-ringing and flower-scattering. Colonel Gore, with proud, happy smile, bowing to the people as he led his graceful

bride to the carriage ; Gavin Rivers, broad-shouldered and stately, coming next with Elene by his side, Elene Somers, soft and white and tranquil as a piece of fleecy cloud. After them the other bridesmaids, whispering and smiling behind their bouquets, and then the people from London in their sweeping brocades and Paris millinery.

Janita sat there at the attic window long after they had all gone away, long after the last little dirty boy had clambered down from the church railings, and the beadle had rolled up the crimson carpeting and carried it away back to the Hall. She was only conscious of a dull heavy stupor that had been thickening round her ever since the afternoon that Noelline—Mrs. Colonel Gore she must call her now—came to say good-bye to her dear friends at the Aspens. A stupor that was worse to bear because she must keep it all to herself, covering it up with a show of cheerfulness, choking it as well as she could with conversation and household duties, and all the little matters of a woman's daily life. That others knew her suffering would make it more intolerable. She could not even talk to Miss Alwyne about it, or win strength from her good words to bear the weight which was pressing more heavily upon her day by day.

The best she could do was to forget, to turn resolutely away from the sunshine that lay behind her, and go forth into the shadow through which all life now seemed to lead. Perhaps by and by she might get accustomed to it, it might not seem quite so cold and dark. And yet, what had she done? What sin had she committed that she should feel so miserable? What was there in her heart that she feared for God to look upon? Why, then, need she be unhappy?

Ah! if people could only reason philosophically upon their griefs, and dispel them by a logical process, the world would be more comfortable than it is.

But whilst poor Janita, sitting there at her attic window, was trying to do this and trying in vain, things were going on gaily enough at the Hall. There was drinking of healths and making of speeches and whispering of compliments, at which the bridemaids blushed pink as the roses in their bouquets; and everybody hoped that everybody else would be very happy, and the bridegroom said that it was the proudest day of his life, and he only wished that the respected friend who had supported him that morning—bowing to the new steward—might stand in the same enviable position before

many weeks had passed. Whereupon Gavin Rivers bowed again, rather gravely perhaps, and Elene Somers adjusted the jessamine flowers in her white lace berthe, not without a blush. On the whole it was a very successful wedding breakfast.

“Darling,” said Noelline to her sister elect, as they were exchanging a few last words in the boudoir before young Mrs. Gore donned her cashmere shawl, and stepped into the Colonel’s travelling carriage, “darling, if Gavin presses you to mention an early day, do not oppose him. You know he is rather impetuous and hasty sometimes, and if anything should happen to vex him, and the engagement should drop through, it would grieve me so. Now do give way to him for my sake. You don’t know how anxious I am to see him comfortably settled. And he will be so lonely when I am gone. So very lonely.”

Elene did give way; without so much pressing as Bessie Ashton had required under similar circumstances. But then Bessie was an ignorant housemaid who had never learned propriety or anything of the sort, and Miss Somers, as you are perfectly aware, was a highly connected lady with all the benefit of education and position. Besides,

Meadowthorpe Hall, with its bronzes and family plate and Turkey carpets and carved oak furniture, was a different home, very different, from the four-roomed cottage and slip of garden behind, which waited for Bessie's acceptance. So that very evening, as the Dean's daughter and Gavin Rivers stood together beside the fountain pond, listening to the footsteps of the dancers and the sound of merry music in the great corridor, it was agreed that the wedding should take place before the end of the year. Most likely early in December.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.









